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AUS/NZ

JUNE – AUGUST 2022
ISSUE 009

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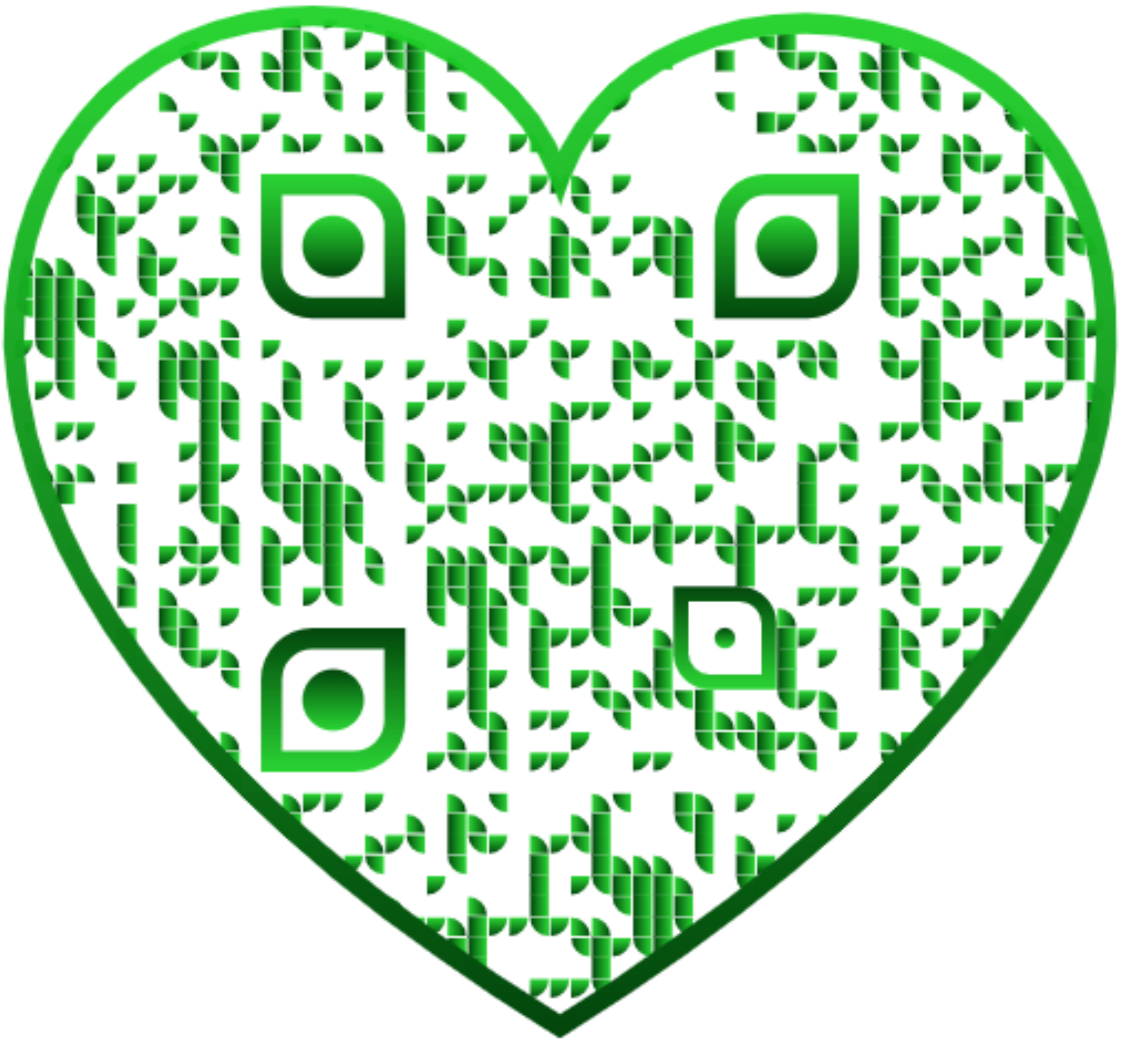

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MEET THE BANK COMMITTED TO NET ZERO BY 2035

Bank Australia has committed to achieving net zero emissions across its operations, and its lending and investment portfolio by 2035. Here's how the bank plans to achieve it.

By **Emily Kratzmann**

Over the past few years, there's been a lot of talk about 2050. Big corporations and governments have been using 2050 as somewhat of a yardstick: "We'll get our acts together and definitely stop those nasty emissions by 2050, right guys?"

But in order to turn this ship around and actually save the planet, climate action — ceasing the use of fossil fuels — needs to be taken much sooner. 2050 is too late. We need to start cutting emissions now.

Bank Australia knows what's what. It knows climate change is the defining issue of our time, and immediate action is required. Which is why it has committed to achieving net zero emissions across its business by 2035.

"OUR 2035 NET ZERO TARGET IS THE MOST AMBITIOUS OF ANY BANK IN THE COUNTRY AND MAKES BANK AUSTRALIA ONE OF THE MOST AMBITIOUS BANKS GLOBALLY,"

explains Bank Australia's Managing Director Damien Walsh. "We hope our stance encourages other banks and financial institutions to accelerate their climate objectives as well."

So how is Bank Australia going to do it? Here are just some of its plans.

Most of its emissions come from the bank's lending portfolio (that's the loans it provides to build and buy homes), so it will be working with customers to help them reduce their emissions from electricity and gas use.

"We know that to achieve net zero, we'll need to work in partnership with our customers to reduce their emissions and advocate for rapid electrification of Australian homes," Damien says.

Bank Australia has been using 100% renewable electricity since 2019; it has already switched its fleet cars to hybrid. The next step is shifting its buildings and branches off gas, and helping bank staff reduce their emissions when commuting to and from work.

While the bank has long been funding registered carbon offset projects, its 2035 strategy will see it explore direct investments in projects that draw down emissions. It's starting by looking into opportunities on its Salvana conservation reserve (which, by the way, is part-owned by every single Bank Australia customer).

Numerous fantastic initiatives are planned for the conservation reserve, particularly around resilience. The bank is working on a direct seeding project, which includes developing a climate-adjusted seed provenance collection, and sourcing seeds from hotter and drier, and cooler and wetter locations to plant in the reserve in years ahead. Land conservation is such an important part of protecting the environment, and the team hopes to share its learnings with other Australian landholders to show them what's possible too.

Of course, climate change isn't just about reducing emissions. It's about justice too. Bank Australia recognises that First Nations voices must be heard first and foremost on climate action. It's working with Barengi Gadjin Land Council to implement Indigenous land management practices at the conservation reserve; after all, it's Indigenous land management that's kept this country growing for tens of thousands of years, and this knowledge is essential to addressing the climate crisis.

"These targets are bold," Damien admits. "We don't yet have all the answers on how we're going to achieve them, but we're committed to working hard and being transparent about our progress."

Bank Australia

IMAGES SUPPLIED BY BANK OF AUSTRALIA

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Eight Kiwi Artists Tipped to Take Over

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By Jake Challenor

CHAII BY FRANCA PARK

CHAII
Photograph by Franca Park

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SAMUEL STONE

CONSCIOUSLY CULTURED DIAMONDS

MORE LUXURY FOR LESS

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CHRIS CUFFARO

On the Cover
RÜFÜS DU SOL, photographed at the Mondrian Hotel NYC on September 23, 2021
BY **SHERVIN LAINEZ**

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ROLLING STONE AUS/NZ (ISSN 1320-0615) is published quarterly, which is subject to change at any time, by The Brag Media, Level 1, 9-13 Bibby Street, Chiswick, NSW, 2046.
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Embracing Sustainability

WITH MINI'S HEAD OF DESIGN *Oliver Heilmer*

By AUGUSTUS WELBY

MINI Head of Design, **Oliver Heilmer**

THREE YEARS AGO, the leaders of Australia's two major political parties were sniping at each other about whether an increase in electric vehicles (EVs) would "end the weekend." But while the back-and-forth made headlines, it obscured the fact that both parties have been in favour of EV market expansion for several years.

The reason for the bipartisan consensus on EVs is simple: EVs are better for the planet, and major car manufacturers such as the BMW group are beginning to produce them in droves. But for all the merits of transitioning from fuel combustion engines to cars powered by electric batteries, it's not the only area in which car designers can make sustainability-focused interventions.

MINI's Head of Design, Oliver Heilmer, has overseen the conversion of the brand's classic 3-door Hatch into a fully electrified vehicle. MINI's entire portfolio will be electrified by 2030. *Rolling Stone Australia* spoke to Heilmer from his home in Munich about designing MINI EVs and the brand's sustainable future.

What are some of the benefits to come from designing MINIs with sustainability in mind?

You have much better packages in terms of roominess, interior space. The level of gravity is much lower than in a normal combustion engine, which for MINI is perfect since we are always talking about the "go-kart feeling."

When you're making these design tweaks for electrified MINI models, are you trying to stay true to the MINI brand and style?

We've always been aware that the MINI Hatches are our basis, but we also looked back to the beginning of MINI — where we found that it was just functional. There were no pure styling elements - it was reduced to, "Well you need to drive it, right?"

We took this as an opportunity to bring that back to the next generation of the MINI family. Like, "OK, let's focus on what's necessary and let's make it beautiful."

Aside from swapping gas-powered combustion engines for electric batteries, what other features of the design and manufacture are you making more sustainable?

There's many materials and there's a level – I think aluminium is at the top, and stainless steel or just steel. The BMW Group is working a lot with recycled aluminium and so forth. That's a big impact. Another really big impact is leather, where we see the CO2 impact is immense.

What are you replacing leather with?

There's a lot of pre-development in different technologies, like leather from mushrooms. What's important for the artificial leather is that we're going to reduce the amount of oil, but from a tactile point of view, how it feels, from a visual quality, from its colours, you barely see any difference from a normal leather.

Australia is a long way behind Europe in the embrace of electric vehicles. Why should car owners be excited about EVs?

I'm currently driving an electric MINI and it's honestly so much fun to drive. It seems to be a perfect fit, from that little engine and the low centre of gravity, it's purely go-kart driving. When you have the combination between an engine that is directly reacting to what you want to do with the throttle, combined with this fast, quick turning around corners, it really feels fantastic.

On the other hand, I'm commuting every day, let's say 15 miles [24km], and there's some sections where you're just going 30 miles an hour [48km/h] and at that point an electrified car is just quiet. In the morning and in the evening after a busy day, it really calms you down. As soon as the noise is not there anymore, you think, "Wow, this is the future, this is something different."

What's the timeframe for the MINI fleet becoming completely electrified?

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Editor's Letter

Blood, Sweat, Tears & Years

EXPERTS SUGGEST THAT it takes us about a decade to become an overnight success in our careers – that's 3,650 days of making mistakes, grinding, hustling, learning, and celebrating the small wins as they come. It's only after this tenacious and tedious climb up the ladder that we can, hopefully, emerge 'successful'. And even then, everyone's definition of success differs greatly.

Sure, success can arrive earlier – when hard work and happenstance collide it can create the perfect storm. But for the rest of us, it can take much longer than ten years to become successful, let alone *feel* successful.

The same is true in music.

The phrase 'overnight success' is notorious in the music industry. It's like a bumper sticker adhered to breakout bands of the past like Silverchair and Cold Chisel, and the new hitmakers of today like The Kid LAROI and Tones And I. But the truth is, it's all smoke and mirrors. The sprint to stardom began long before any of these history-making artists came close to achieving chart-topping status; think long, cold winters touring rural parts of the country to build a base, rejection letters from record label executives who failed to catch a glimpse of what they would become, and reams of crumpled paper littered with ideas for lyrics and melodies.

Everyone's path to prominence is wildly different.

The definition of success for Australian trio Rüfüs Du Sol is no exception. Especially when you compare their slow-burning rise to that of many of their contemporaries. I say 'slow-burning' because their fire hasn't waned. Rüfüs are as hot today as they were when their debut album *Atlas* hit number one on the Australian pop charts shortly after its 2013 release. And now, here we are some ten years later and Rüfüs are – finally – celebrating their first-ever Grammy win in 2022. I suspect it won't be their last.

"Success is a marathon – not a sprint."

Rolling Stone's LA-based contributor, Nicolas Stecher, spent a long day riding around California with Rüfüs for this issue's cover story, and put it best in an email when filing his piece: "Really strange to say a band that has several world tours, four albums, a Grammy, is just starting – but honestly, that's how it feels. Like this is just the beginning."

Success is a marathon – not a sprint. The journey to get there might be demanding, but it's the guts and gusto required to *stay* successful that is life's true challenge. The big lesson, then? There is no single blueprint for success, which is a thread that you will find throughout this issue of *Rolling Stone* as you time travel with Rüfüs Du Sol, step inside Jack White's orbit, head into 5SOS' studio, and then onto the runway with *Drag Race* queens chasing pop stardom.

JAKE CHALLENOR
EDITOR

ON THE COVER

RÜFÜS DU SOL FOR ROLLING STONE AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND

PHOTOGRAPHER:
SHERVIN LAINEZ

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TE KAAHU: Standing In Her Power

FOR NEW ZEALAND artist Em-Haley Walker, connection to her Māori heritage, language and culture is paramount. It's the true north in all she does, from launching her te reo Māori project TE KAAHU in 2020 — a stark differentiator from the festival-primed alt-pop of her project Theia, to her work as a teacher of te reo language skills and tikanga Māori practices.

It should come as no surprise then, as she readied the release of her debut album *Te Kaahu O Rangi*, that her ancestors were by her side.

It started with regular visits from female kaahu, New Zealand's native hawk (which her project is named after). But as she delved deeper into sharing the knowledge and storytelling of her ancestors through song, they visited in many different forms. When she rehearsed her live show at the end of last year she felt the hands of her tūpuna (female ancestors) on her back as she performed a karakia, a ritual chant. And when she filmed the music video for her single "Rangirara" — about her unending love for her grandmother — near her ancestral Waikato river, she witnessed a Māori legend unfold before her eyes. In legend, the fierce female taniwha, a supernatural creature by the name of Waiwaia appears as a log that floats down the Waikato.

"There was no debris in the awa [river] and then all of a sudden, really slowly, this log with this branch coming out of it, started moving down the river," says Walker.

"[...] This entire project feels like it's been led by [my female ancestors] and I've had the most incredible experiences with my kui [grandmother]. I can feel my kui, my nanny, tangibly, and then I've had all of these experiences where I've felt Nanny Mete, which is the main matriarch who I've written about and tried to honour, which is my great grandmother."

For Walker, social media platforms are part of her reclamation and redress journey. She's part of a vibrant and vocal Māori community on TikTok and her videos posted to Facebook and Instagram have been embraced by both rangitahi Māori (young Māori) and pakeha (white New Zealanders).

"My manager started showing me all the shares and comments and the amount of Māori and pakeha who are so supportive and adore the vocals, the nostalgic vibe, and the harmonies and the peaceful warmth that comes from it," says Walker. "It's just really amazing."

Walker quotes a Māori proverb when speaking of her work with TE KAAHU: *Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua*, 'I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past'. She sees the past, present and future of Māori culture as intertwined, with language at the forefront.

"Although most importantly for me, this is something I do for the benefit of my people, it is really this decolonising practice where by way of me doing this mahi [work], it's able to touch non-Māori as well; and if anything, expose them to the beauty of our reo [language], the talent of our people, and also the timelessness of our reo and music." ® POPPY REID

Picture This

PHOTOS

Australian and New Zealand artists are constantly turning heads; *Rolling Stone* is here to capture it all.

▶ BRUX

BRUX (formerly known as Elizabeth Rose) in her new hometown of Brooklyn, where she set up a home studio and recorded her latest EP *Take*.

Photograph by Emmajane Hoffman

▼ MASON DANE

T-Pain and Newcastle's Mason Dane chilling in Pain's Rolls-Royce Cullinan in Atlanta.

Photograph by JSN

▲ KING STINGRAY

Roy, Lewis and Dima fishing at Dima's homeland Bawaka in East Arnhem Land.

Photograph by Sam Brumby

▼ ELECTRIC FIELDS

Artist and performer Zaachariaha Fielding and producer-composer Michael Ross at The Corner Hotel in Melbourne on their 'Gold Energy' national headline tour.

Photograph by Leesa Maree Creative

▼ DARREN HAYES

Darren Hayes rehearsing his Mardi Gras set in the pouring Sydney rain. Hayes' last Sydney Mardi Gras performance was seventeen years ago when he wasn't "out" as a proud gay man.

Photograph by Tim Potter (Hayes' manager)

◀ BRAD COX

Country singer-songwriter Brad Cox bought a patch of land in Central Queensland in late 2020 where he's been "throwing tantrums at the world, drinking too much, drinking not enough, trying to stay positive, failing, not talking to anyone for two months, chasing cows, and writing for my new album."

Photograph by Elder

RS RECOMMENDS

ARTISTS YOU NEED TO KNOW

EIGHT KIWI ARTISTS TIPPED TO TAKE OVER

By **JAKE CHALLENOR** Photograph by **Evan Xiao**

CHAII

Persian-Kiwi rapper, producer, engineer and director, CHAII, is the future of hip-hop. Her 2020 *Lightswitch* visual EP is a masterclass that proves some artists can, in fact, do it all. CHAII returned in 2021 with *Pineapple Pizza*, a flavour explosion for the soul.

RS Recommends: "Pineapple Pizza"

From Crowded House and Keith Urban to Lorde, not a year goes by without a Kiwi artist or group making their mark on music's world stage. *Rolling Stone* unearths eight more destined for a global chart attack.

Mitch James

It would be an easy mistake to label Mitch James as just another Ed Sheeran. Sure, they've shared a stage together, they both have a knack for hooky earworms, and they both play the guitar. But James delivers a drastically deeper cut on "Bright Blue Skies" and "History".

RS Recommends: "History"

WHO SHOT SCOTT

WHO SHOT SCOTT is the alt-hip-hop project from Iraqi born, New Zealand-bred producer Zaidoon 'Zee' Nasir, who turns his heartbreak into hits with occasional undertones of humour. WHO SHOT SCOTT has two EPs waiting for you: 2021's *MERCY* and 2022's *MERCY II*.

RS Recommends: "REALLY LIKE THAT"

MITCH JAMES: HISTORY PRESS, WHO SHOT SCOTT: PRESS

Harper Finn

Like his father Neil, Harper Finn's destiny feels as if it's already written. An overnight success in the making, Harper has already released ten singles and won a Breakthrough Artist gong. Will 2022's "Different Skies" be the bop to cross borders?

RS Recommends:
"Dance Away These Days"

HARPER FINN: JAMES LOWE

AN APPLE A DAY ...

TOM FISHER

SUPPLIED

PARK RD

Surf-rock band PARK RD are turning heads for all the right reasons. The five-piece from West Auckland, who met at high school, recently supported Spacey Jane. The group has matured since 2018's "Lay Me Down" — the proof is in 2021's "I Got You".

RS Recommends: "Surfer Boy Paradise"

There's a Tuesday

Christchurch band There's a Tuesday are a triple threat: indie, folk, and pop. After their 2019 local hit "Piñata Head" found its way onto the pop charts in New Zealand, BENEE inked the four piece to her indie record label, Olive Records, leading us to 2022's moody "Baby Blue".

RS Recommends: "Baby Blue"

Bakers Eddy

Punk rock outfit Bakers Eddy traded Wellington for Melbourne, and it shows ("Coffee Mate"). On their latest album *Love Boredom Bicycles* you will discover — and find yourself dancing to — songs labelled "Hi-Vis Baby", and their coming of age anthem, "21".

RS Recommends: "21"

BAKERS EDDY: LEILA MAULEN

Goodwill

Direct from his Christchurch home studio, producer and artist Will McGillivray — previously of the chart-topping band Nomad — returns with Goodwill. 2022's first lick, "Get Angry", treds a darker path than previous works, drawing inspiration from The National and Bon Iver.

RS Recommends: "Get Angry"

GOODWILL: SUPPLIED

THE NEW RULE OF 5 SECONDS OF SUMMER

By POPPY REID

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDY DELUCA

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ALIVE

Ashton Irwin is reversing his Porsche convertible out of the parking lot at LA's NRG Studios when his manager Ben walks up beside him to introduce us. The top is down and his left arm is casually hanging over the car door. He flashes a broad smile and promises to be right back. 5 Seconds of Summer need a 12-string Strat guitar and his place is closest.

IT'S BEEN OVER a year since the band from Western Sydney inadvertently started work on their fifth studio album, *5SOS5*. It began with a 'no expectations' writing trip to the Californian desert, and now, on this warm February afternoon 13 months later, it's the final day of recording.

The rest of 5 Seconds of Summer are in the Moroccan Room inside the studio, Michael Clifford is on the couch and Luke Hemmings is cradling his guitar on a seat near the Neve Console. It's the same room the band recorded their 2020 single "Red Desert" in, and where acts like Tom Petty, Fiona Apple and Korn have recorded before. Only when I meet bassist/vocalist Callum Hood do I realise how much Irwin stands out against the others today. Clifford is in a black jumper and shorts, Hemmings is in a t-shirt and an open-button shirt, Hood is in baggy grey pants and an oversized Hibernian soccer jersey, and Irwin is in a suit, dressed like he's ready for a Quentin Tarantino casting call.

When he returns from grabbing that guitar, he tells me he's celebrating: "I woke up today and was like, 'Man suit up, let's do this. Bring it home'."

POPPY REID *is Editor in Chief of Rolling Stone AU/NZ and was shortlisted for Mumbrella's 2021 Editor of the Year.*

The global hitmakers have a lot to celebrate. Following eleven years as one of the world's biggest bands (four number one albums, a place on *Billboard*'s Top Artists of the 2010s Chart, over eighty award wins), 5SOS have spent the past year making the kind of career moves befitting their industry stature. But those moves have come with risk. The band's split from both their label (Interscope/EMI) and management (Modest! Management) in March last year was widely reported. As was their signing to BMG for a global record deal; the one which sparked a $2.5 million lawsuit from management firm YM&U Group for an alleged breach of contract. The suit was filed last year, after YM&U's fleeting eight-month partnership with the band.

Despite the legal battle, 5SOS have been bolstered by a new team to explore their creative freedom. This record marks their first self-produced album with Clifford at the helm. It's a vast change of pace for the band, having been led in the past by star producers like Andrew Watt and Louis Bell on hit singles "Youngblood" and "Teeth". However, this new album has come with some apprehension from the band.

"I've only ever heard that [self-producing] go wrong to be honest," smiles Irwin. "Apart from like Pete Townsend recording *Baba O'Riley* or something. I can't remember many that have been like, 'Fuck yeah, glad they did that'."

For the moment, Irwin and Hemmings aren't needed by Clifford in the Moroccan Room, so they're in another room off the foyer reflecting on the "really fucking long" journey of making this record.

"This isn't the first time we've attempted several of these songs," notes Hemmings.

Irwin chimes in: "Yeah, we're re-recording a song in there for the fifth or sixth time."

The urge for growth is hardwired into the engine of 5 Seconds of Summer. From touring five countries in five days in 2014, to being one of the first bands to release a pandemic-era record (2020's *Calm* took out the top spot in the UK over Dua Lipa), to this year forking out half-a-million-dollars to produce a free 10 year anniversary sketch show for fans, the four friends just don't have it in them to do things by halves.

5SOS' early years are a tale of grit, determination and true friendship. As Hemmings, Hood, and Clifford navigated high school together and Irwin worked to help his mum pay the bills, the group went from bonding over their shared musical diet of pop-punk, to uploading cover songs on YouTube, to playing for twelve people at their first show at Sydney's Annandale Hotel in 2011. Just fourteen months later, they were touring the world with One Direction.

It may be hard to believe, but the shot at joining a global tour with the British boy band behemoth wasn't an easy 'yes' for 5 Seconds of Summer. On a mission to ditch the 'boy band' epithet, 5SOS pushed back on the opportunity at first.

"We're like, 'We don't want to be that, we don't want to be that'," remembers Callum Hood. "And then we let go of it and it was an amazing opportunity.

"I'm glad that we had people around us that were like, 'Look, you've got to pretty much pull your head out of your arse here. One of the greatest bands of this generation is asking you to go on tour with them'."

The band only had about twenty Australian live shows under their belt before they were thrust onto global stages with the boys from One Direction. But even with this rapid rise, 5SOS have always had a small but vocal group of detractors who insist that they're more of a 'pop group' than accomplished musicians. Perhaps it's the power-pop choruses that pepper their songs, or the 'singalong' lyrics that everybody knows (*"You look so perfect standing there / In my American Apparel underwear"*), or perhaps it's all the "whoa-oh-oh"s and "hey-ey-ey-ey"s. Or even the fact their music videos are so damn *fun*.

But in truth, 5 Seconds of Summer are gifted musicians who have flourished in their versatility. They can deliver a power ballad like no other ("Amnesia", "Easier"), they are one of Australia's most successful exports (their eponymous album hit number one in 14 countries) and they can back it all up live with with airtight riffs, crisp percussion, serene harmonies and polished grit.

Naturally, Hood agrees. "I couldn't talk more highly of any other musicians in a band than the other three guys," he says, beaming. "They're so versatile. They do everything."

You can hear the band teleport into new musical worlds on each progressive album. Some of the more fickle fans might experience their new styles and influences as sharp, unexpected right turns, but true diehard members of the 5SOSFam have loved the band's creative evolution – although they rarely get the credit for just how far ahead of the curve they are.

"I'm glad that we had people around us that were like, 'Look, you've got to pretty much pull your head out of your arse here'."

The loyal fanbase has often been disregarded by music snobs as just a bunch of "hysterical" girls. In a piece written for the *New York Times*, Jon Caramanica wrote: "[...] they delivered these songs to the usual screaming, swooning girls: notably, both tweens and teens. When a roadie was clearing the stage of items thrown by the crowd, it looked as if he were gathering both intimates and stuffed animals."

Sadly, many predominantly female fanbases are still being mischaracterised in this way. When young girls demonstrate their passion at concerts for artists like Justin Bieber, The Beatles or 5SOS they have been labelled 'hysterical'. When young boys do the same thing at an AFL game, they're just being "enthusiastic". In a

5 Seconds of Summer at SSE Arena Belfast on April 4 2022.
Photograph by Ryan Fleming

moment that shows the band's deep maturity and realisation of their position as high profile stars, Irwin and Hood say they've never downplayed the intelligence of the 5SOSFam, and in particular its female members.

"The young, female fanbases know what's good before anybody else, they always have," says Irwin, seriously. "They make it easy for these awful people who take advantage of that," he continues, perhaps thinking of the proverbial 'men in suits' whose job it is to convert fan data into sales data. "Because they [the fans] all point at this great thing and go, 'That's the good thing'. In a pure way. 'We like these guys'."

"[...] But you know what's beautiful about it?," Irwin adds. "In just my personal experience, it also helped me identify, from an outside perspective, what were good things about us. It was like..," he pauses, taking a short moment, "look it's so obvious, of course. The way we're best mates – that's the special thing. Of course anyone could go and write a song that sounds like 5SOS and release it, but it's like we're the guys who are actually hanging out to make that and spend the time, and *live* in that world together, you know?"

When I ask Hood about the term 'fangirl', he has the demeanour of someone who's just cracked his knuckles before sitting down to write a biting open letter.

"I think a lot of people dismiss the taste of a lot of young female audiences," he says. "[...] It's an incredibly awesome thing to have a largely female fanbase. I wouldn't trade that for anything, because they are very caring and they're very empathetic. And they are very creative as well.

"So for me, it is an incredible honour to have a female fanbase. And honestly, having grown up being surrounded by my mum and many aunties and my sister, and many cousins, women are an incredible force that really shouldn't be reckoned with."

RIGHT NOW, THE busiest 5 Seconds of Summer member is Michael Clifford. When the band worked with producers like Benny Blanco and John Feldmann (the former leader of ska-punk band Goldfinger) he was the one taking mental notes and tinkering away in his own time to hone his own style of production. Now, it seems as if he's battling a tinge of imposter syndrome, though it comes across quite endearing.

"Luckily for me I'm so fucking self-deprecating that I hate most things that I do anyway," he chuckles, half-serious. "So that's really helpful for the process, because I'm so unbiased."

Clifford is currently taking a break from his producer duties to speak for the first time about the inception of *5SOS5*. When the band drove to Joshua Tree for their 'no expectations' writing trip, they holed up at Rancho V in November 2020 – Hemmings and Clifford in one car, Hood and Irwin in another.

"It had these really, really crap houses on the property," Clifford says, referring to the home studio spaces. "And I feel bad for saying that, because I hope he [the owner] doesn't see me talk shit about it, but it was pretty rough."

It was the first time in the band's career that they had written without an end goal in mind; a silver lining of the global pandemic. "We were like, 'I don't even know if we'll ever be able to tour again'," Clifford says. "'Are people still releasing music? Like, what's happening?'"

Without the pressure of writing for anything in particular, they demoed fifteen songs. Clifford tells me they're "some of the best songs we've ever made."

"As we were driving home Luke and I were listening to the songs together and I just remember looking at each other and being like, 'Holy fucking shit. We just started the new album'."

The band's desire for creative independence has become more vivid with every record. On 2018's *Youngblood* 5SOS experimented with industrial pop and new wave, and with previous album *Calm*, the band flexed their lush-rock muscle and showed off their penchant for dark soundscapes. The themes that run through *5SOS5* expand the band's ethos to explore concepts like mateship, unity, and growth. It also acts as their way of processing love (Clifford got married in January, Hemmings announced his engagement last June), and loss (Hood and Irwin both went through breakups).

"We're all in such a better, different place than we were on the last album," says Hemmings. "And you can hear that musically in the lyrics and aesthetically, it's all sort of a bit... I don't like to say this, but a bit freer."

THE FIRST song the band wrote for the record is first single "Complete Mess". It's a big bang style smash-up of sophisticated pop and grandiose soft-rock, sprinkled with the band's emo-indebted lyrical instincts, and a rap beat underneath. The song's title and hero lyric (*"You make me complete / You make me a complete mess"*) is an inside joke the band shares with fans. Hemmings has a singlet that he's worn onstage so many times, it became a Halloween outfit. Fans once recreated the singlet, painting on the slogan 'You Complete Mess' but the final two letters are smaller and in a different font, giving the illusion it reads: 'You Complete Me'. Now, the singlet is available for

RYAN FLEMING

MICHAEL CLIFFORD
at 3Arena, Dublin, Ireland
on April 3, 2022

purchase on Etsy under: *Luke Hemmings You Complete Mess Shirt*.

Clifford is grinning as he remembers how the song came about, shuffling forward in his seat. "He [Hemmings] was like, 'Guys, this might be the worst thing ever'. He's like, 'This literally might be the worst thing I've ever done. But I have a crazy idea'."

"[...] We were like, 'Luke if you don't tell us, I literally won't sleep'. He just sang the chorus," Clifford proceeds to sing. "*Oh you make me complete, make me complete, make me a complete mess*. We were like okay done, I'm sold."

"Complete Mess" was a hit. It trended worldwide on release, and the clip (which the band had filmed the day prior) clocked over one million plays within the first 24 hours.

Following that trip to Joshua Tree, the band went back to the desert for another writing excursion, again just the four of them. After that, it was a big decision to bring on collaborators; the list of co-writers includes Australian hitmaker Sarah Aarons, Rami Yacoub, Sarah Hudson, J Hart, Mick Coogan, Sierra Deaton (Hemming's fiancé), and Michael Pollack.

"We had to learn to want to collaborate again, you know what I mean?," says Irwin. "Because we had learnt what, in a more mature, refined way...," he pauses, "what our personal skills were."

It's odd to think that just over a decade earlier, the band were recording DIY cover videos for YouTube using a box for a drum, two guitars, and a bass guitar for Hood borrowed from Irwin's stepdad. 5SOS grew very quickly from a makeshift acoustic band to selling out arenas. At times, mainly when they come across as overly excited or apprehensive, the band seems like they're in the early stages of their career. As if they're in year one, working on album one.

"He's like, 'This literally might be the worst thing I've ever done. But I have a crazy idea'."

So what's the secret? What's in the special sauce that stopped them from becoming a music industry cliché or a candle burned at both ends? Why have they never even toyed with the idea of breaking up? One answer could be that they're not a manufactured product, brought together by male gatekeepers in suits à la Girls Aloud and Hear'Say. But according to Clifford, it's more to do with basic respect and continuous forward momentum.

"We just kind of give each other the space to do our own thing and you know, if someone's being a dick we just say they're having a bad day and then we move on. And by tomorrow they're all good," Clifford says. "[...] Things move so fast and there's always something new happening every day, that it would be just too much effort to like, go through it all. It's just like, move on, because something else is going to happen fucking tomorrow."

DUBLIN SHOW, SUPPLIED

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Art by Katie Taylor

After more than 15 years of marriage, a small town couple from New Zealand with four children explain what happened when they made the decision to trade monogamy for polyamory.

By Nick Boyce

I DO THE SURPRISING TRUTH ABOUT OPEN MARRIAGES

Some names in this article have been changed by Rolling Stone to protect the anonymity of the people who agreed to be interviewed for this story.

WHEN CLAIRE opened the dating app for the first time, she was apprehensive. She had recently ended a long-term relationship and was worried that she had forgotten how to date. With a successful career and now in her late thirties, Claire was trying to navigate how to be single again. While swiping through what felt like an unlimited number of matches, she came across Jack. "This guy will be an expert," Claire chuckles as she remembers what crossed her mind when she discovered Jack's profile. Jack, a handsome guy also in his late thirties, was very transparent about being in an 'open relationship' with his wife.

"For me, at that time, I was dipping my toes into the dating world. The fact that he was in an open relationship was more appealing because I knew the score... He was very clear about what his situation was, and it made things really easy and safe for me." Within a matter of weeks, Claire and Jack arranged their first date. They met up at a cosy neighbourhood bar to play board games over a glass of wine, and had what Claire describes as a very "traditional" first encounter. "It was really funny and fun, and he was just so respectful... he was never pushing anything." Claire talks very fondly about the four months she dated Jack and how much she admired the relationship he has with his wife. "The emotional intelligence that you need to pull that off, and the communication skills... it's actually inspiring," she tells *Rolling Stone*. Their relationship ended after Claire met someone she wanted to be exclusive with. But she keeps in touch with Jack and the two remain friends.

Claire isn't chasing an open relationship with her newfound partner, but she hasn't ruled out the possibility either. "I don't aspire to have an open relationship, what I aspire to is to have a relationship that I can have that conversation in." Even though she's happy with her current monogamy, she acknowledges the things you can miss when you're committed to one long-term partner: "The first kiss, or working each other's bodies out, you don't get to do that again."

Psychotherapist and couples therapist Melissa Ferrari has seen thousands of couples throughout her career. She explains the ongoing question of love and sex: how we balance "that need to be desired and wanted, and the rewards you get from a relationship that may be monogamous but provide enormous safety and security". Where couples can run into trouble is when they assume they know what their partner wants, without actually having these difficult conversations. When it comes to marriage, Ferrari says, "For some, the representation of marriage brings the safety and security that is required to keep the brain a bit more settled in the relationship."

Having recently celebrated their 20th wedding anniversary, Jack and his wife, Sophie, have experience when it comes to navigating marriage. The two appear very much in love, repeatedly checking in with each other throughout the interview and often finishing each other's sentences. Both in their late thirties, they got married at a young age and have four children together — three of whom are young and live with them. Jack works in IT for a government agency and Sophie works part time for an NGO while studying. They are both warm and personable and seem at ease talking about their unorthodox marriage. It's impressive to watch two people dissect their relationship with such candour. Few couples boast the emotional intelligence and self-awareness to be that honest with themselves, let alone their spouse.

> "**We still struggle heaps...** we're three-and-a-half years since the first date and **we're still growing** in different ways."

Despite the two decades together, Jack and Sophie only decided to open their marriage a few years ago. "We started jokingly talking about finding a third person for the marriage," Jack explains. The jokes continued between them for a few years and eventually evolved into more serious discussions. Sophie identifies as bisexual, and conversations about that part of her identity began to happen. "It was something we knew but we hadn't had conversations about. There was one particular night where I initiated a pretty intense discussion about this being something that I really want to [explore]," says Sophie. They joined a Facebook group dedicated to polyamory and toyed with the idea of introducing a third person into the relationship, but ultimately decided that wouldn't work because they both have different 'types'. Instead, they opted to meet people separately and have been swiping through dating apps Bumble and Tinder for potential matches.

Feeling their way through unchartered territory, Jack and Sophie began this new phase of their relationship without laying down any ground rules — but pivoted almost immediately when they realised how quickly things escalated. "As we both got into these fairly intense relationships, suddenly rules felt like they were going to give a lot of security, so we added close to a hundred rules," Sophie explains. They tried to cover all bases and set boundaries around everything they could think of: they had to check in with each other by a certain time and wayward love bites or scratches were forbidden.

The red tape, however, made things more complicated and tense between them. Jack and Sophie began to argue. "It wasn't helpful in the end... it was meant to provide security, but it didn't," Sophie says.

They've since done away with the rule book in lieu of mutual "understandings": always practice safe sex; Sundays are reserved for family; no sharing of pet names and they let the other person know when a relationship hits a certain milestone. Jack explains how it works: "If we're going to see a new person, we would generally communicate that, or if we've said I love you or something like that... making sure that the other person is communicated with about the status of relationships." They both readily admit that there have been times when they haven't liked the person their partner was dating, but neither has tried to intervene. There's a fundamental reason, Jack explains, why they don't have veto power. "If I was seeing someone and Sophie said you can't see that person, then it would damage our relationship, there would be resentment."

Jack and Sophie admit they have separate bedrooms now — but still sleep together often. Sophie likes to have her own space and it means they won't wake the other up after a late-night rendezvous. They seem like they've found an arrangement which works well for them, but it's the product of trial and error. "We still struggle heaps... we're three-and-a-half years since the first date and we're still growing in different ways," Jack confesses.

Having four kids, a spouse, working, and dating multiple people takes a lot of organisation. And while the youngest children don't know all the details of their parents' relationship, all their dates are pencilled on the family chalkboard to keep track of Jack and Sophie when they're out with their respective "friends".

Their polyamory, however, appears to bring a lot of positives. They've each found their independence and have been able to find in other partners things they can't offer each other.

"Sophie needs a lot more space, and I need a lot more affection. Before we opened up, it was always me kind of smothering [Sophie] a little bit... that's actually an incompatibility with us and being open helps." Sophie confidently declares that they have always had a very good sex life before laughing and adding, "Well, in my opinion." Jack returns the laugh and agrees with her wholeheartedly. "We've always had a very experimental sex life. Part of the opening up journey was also getting more involved in the kink scene and the swinging scene."

While they don't have sex with each other's respective partners, they have had group sex

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> **"You can love** someone without taking away from someone else, but you **can't give someone time** without taking away from someone else."

together in "sex party type environments". Their busy dating lives mean they might not have as much time to have sex with each other anymore, but being open certainly has its perks. "It's been a pretty awesome journey to get to know other people and I think it does make you better," Jack says before Sophie cuts in with a cheeky smile to add "and bring home new tricks".

When asked whether their relationship is stronger since they opened their marriage, there's a rare flicker of discomfort. They don't shy away from the question, but it's the first time during the interview where they both take a moment to think. Sophie looks at Jack to gauge his reaction before turning back and saying, "I think having kids so young, I never really got that chance to develop my own personality, almost. I didn't know what I liked, and I didn't know what I wanted to do because it was all about other people."

Jack sits back on the couch while he reflects on this. Sophie continues, "If I had seen it back then, I probably wouldn't have been happy with how it's developed... We were still so entwined that the thought of being our own independent people... seems scary and lonely... but in hindsight, it's better."

Jack and Sophie live in a small town in New Zealand's North Island, about an hour from the nearest big city. They don't broadcast their relationship status, nor do they keep it a secret. "The circle of people who know is quite small. We live in a small community, so we keep it vaguely tight-lipped," says Sophie. Their closest friends all know and so does their eldest son, who likes to check in on them and see who they're dating. They're both openly on dating apps and as a matter of respect, it's important to them that the people they date never feel as if they're some kind of dirty secret. One of Jack's girlfriends joined the family for Christmas lunch last year, bringing presents for the kids. Jack's mouth morphs into a timid smile when asked whether their families know about their arrangement, "it's a funny story." They both laugh and look at each other, pausing for a moment before explaining what happened. Jack had just finished his first date with another woman and Sophie wanted to know all the details. "I'd sent about six or seven messages and realised it was a group chat with my parents," Jack bursts out laughing as he recalls the story. After furiously searching the internet for a way to recall the messages, he had to bite the bullet and call his folks to explain what was happening in his marriage. While his parents know the deal, Jack says they never talk about it.

Where and when do we formulate our ideas of what relationships should look like? It could be from our parents, or the books we've read, or the couples we've watched in movies and TV shows. No doubt it's a combination of many factors. Our concept of a relationship is not something we necessarily revisit or reconsider as we move through life. Like many things in society, we tend to follow what is established. With twenty years as a psychologist and as one of the dating and relationship experts on *Married At First Sight,* Mel Schilling has just about seen it all. Schilling has three key principles when it comes to polyamory: consent, boundaries, and respect.

"All of the principles that apply to healthy positive relationships become a little bit more exaggerated when we're bringing in other parties because there's great emotional risk involved here." Schilling says that true consent in opening up a relationship requires both parties to come to that decision freely. She's seen situations where one person feels pressured to consent out of fear of losing their partner. "I think that initial contract between partners needs to be really explored very thoroughly. I think it needs to be a decision that can be drawn out, because it's the kind of thing someone might make an initial desperate reaction to but it might not be what they actually want," explains Schilling.

What meaning can we attribute to contemporary marriage, an institution derived in many cultures from an era in which the social norms and conventions bear no resemblance to the society we live in today? Schilling says that "the concept of marriage is still useful" but believes if we want to make the most of this traditional device, then "we have to make it our own," she explains. "I think the best marriages are the ones where the couples have these conversations about 'What do we need, what are our boundaries, what is normal for us?'"

In Australia, marriage is legally defined as "the union of two people to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life." Just as the definition was amended in 2017 to recognise that marriage does not have to be limited to a man and a woman, perhaps the law might one day recognise that the exclusion of all others is not necessary to sustain a meaningful, loving and enduring bond. There's no concrete data on how prevalent open relationships are, and there's no typical profile for a polyamorous couple.

"I don't believe it's about a certain type," Schilling says, "there will be people walking around in your community that will be in an open relationship that you wouldn't have picked in a million years."

Some people might question how you can love your partner and want to date other people. "Love is infinite, but time is not," Jack explains. "You can love someone without taking away from someone else, but you can't give someone time without taking away from someone else, and that's the balance, that's hard to learn." The wisdom that Jack and Sophie have to share from their experience is fitting to all relationships, whether monogamous or not. Really understanding your needs, and communicating those to your partner, is key to any healthy, sustainable relationship. For those flirting with the idea of a polyamorous arrangement, Jack and Sophie suggest finding a therapist familiar with polyamory. "You have to accept that your relationship is going to change," Jack says. Sophie looks at him, nodding quietly before saying, "Go for it, but go for it with your eyes wide open." ®

JONATHAN BORBA

RÜFÜS DU SOL: THE HIGHEST RISE

WORDS BY **NICOLAS STECHER**

"I WAS PRETTY dialled in when we played 'Alive', so I was just witnessing it as an audience member onstage," recalls James Hunt as he runs through his band's first landmark show at Los Angeles' Banc of California Stadium. This wasn't just any set, mind you. It was the first time Rüfüs Du Sol played the single live, less than a month after releasing their latest opus *Surrender* in October of last year. It was also their first time performing with Curtis Harding, the American soul/R&B singer featured on the track, on the first of three sold-out nights at a venue massive enough to host the Los Angeles Football Club. And during that climax, the stadium burst with white confetti meant to symbolise rain, nearly drowning the ecstatic audience in a blizzard of paper.

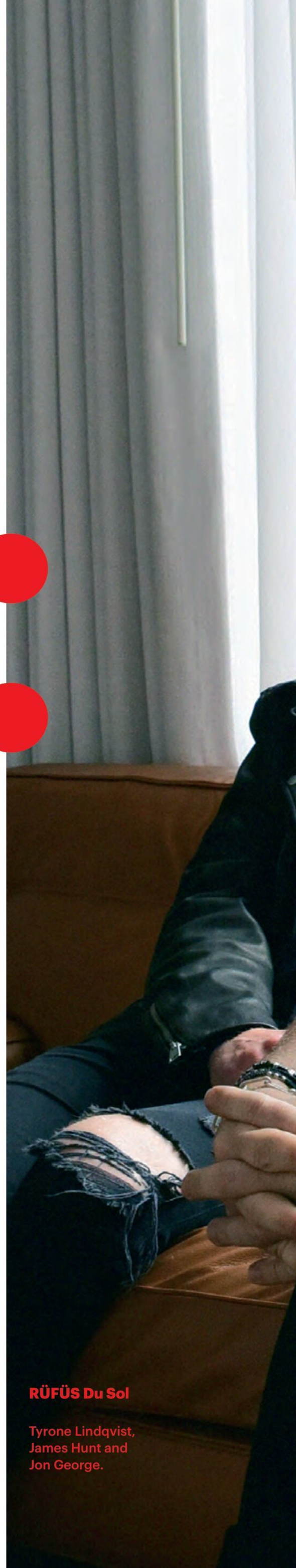
"Especially because we put the focus and spotlight on Curtis, we were kind of shrouded in darkness, silhouetted with rain on the screen behind us," continues the amicable drummer. "In those moments I'm aware that I can react more freely, and I was just laughing because the confetti was so overwhelming: *This is fucking insane!* Just revelling in it. It's such a good feeling playing a song for the first time live, to finally see it."

LOOKS LIKE THERE'S RAIN UP AHEAD LIKE THERE'S A CRACK IN THE HEAVENS

"I was just so focused on getting my pattern on the [Roland] SPD-SX that all I could think about was *Don't fuck this up the first time you play it!*" adds bandmate Jon George. "But when the confetti hit I got to experience it a little more."

We're currently walking the halls of the Banc of California Stadium reliving the epic evening, amongst the towering structures of the concrete cathedral. Below us, workers mow the vividly green field — a slight whiff of cut grass meeting the glorious Southern California sun in the air. The guys squint behind designer sunglasses, smiling, lost accessing halcyon memory banks while scanning the stands.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **SHERVIN LAINEZ**



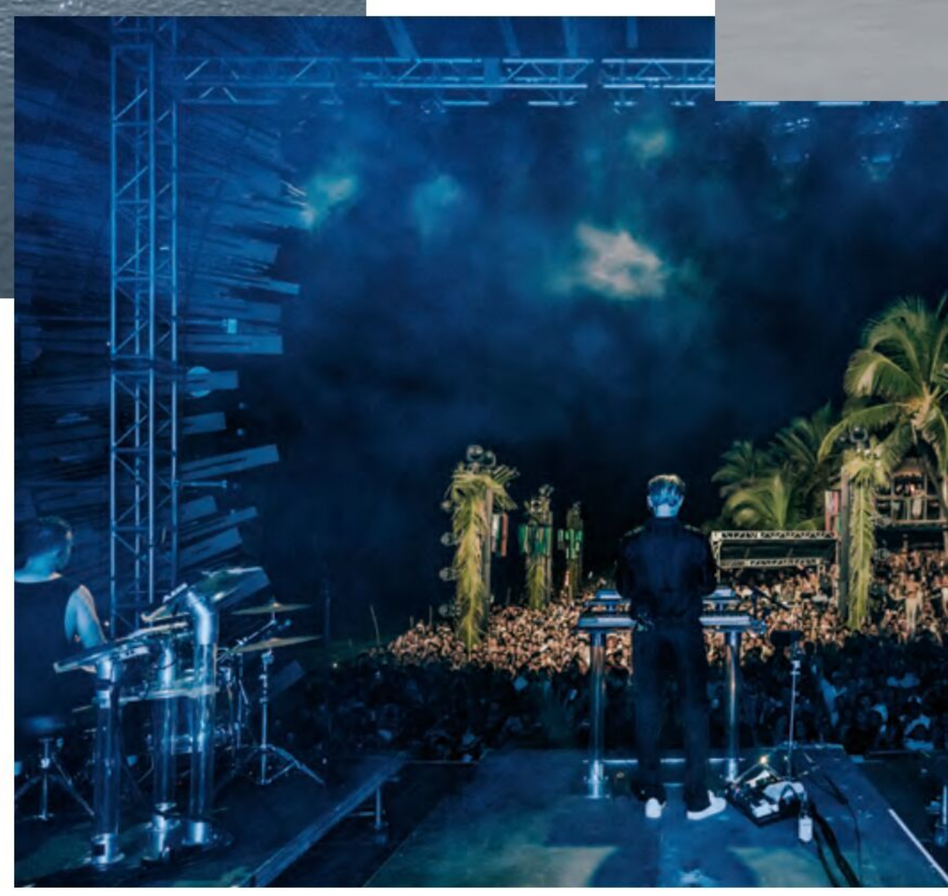
RÜFÜS Du Sol

Tyrone Lindqvist, James Hunt and Jon George.

"YOU REALLY HAD THE WORLD TO GAIN."

THE GRAMMY GODS

After two nominations in 2020, Rüfüs Du Sol won their first-ever Grammy in March 2022 when "Alive" secured Best Dance Recording at the Las Vegas-based ceremony.



THE RÜFÜS ORIGINS

The trio behind Rüfüs Du Sol - Jon George, Tyrone Lindqvist and James Hunt - formed the band in November, 2010. Their first number one album was only three years away when *Atlas* topped the Aussie music charts.

THE GENTS carry themselves with the calm confidence of professional athletes. Not quite rockstars mind you — there's a bit too much self-awareness, like they've beaten back the ogre of arrogance that comes with that label. A dead ringer for Bradley Cooper's younger brother, Jon George radiates the same effortless charm. Perpetual smile, perfectly trimmed beard and coif. With an unbuttoned dark, flowered silk shirt, gold chain and motorcycle cop moustache, Hunt reminds me of what Mac from *Always Sunny In Philadelphia* would be like if he was actually as cool as he thinks he is. Meanwhile, vocalist Tyrone Lindqvist vibrates with a sense of perpetual self-analysis. He talks the least, often letting the others cover a subject, but is deliberate when he speaks. He seems a bit more in his head than the others.

"I felt really nervous walking out on this stage, and I get it at Red Rocks too, because you're at the bottom of the stage essentially," remembers Lindqvist, wisps of blond hair blowing in his face, crisp white Axel Arigato Clean 90 sneakers matching his couture white jumper. "You're like on the ground and the crowd's above you, and it's just like a wall of people. We've experienced twenty to thirty-thousand people in a festival that's all on the ground essentially, and you're above them. Whereas here it's like engulfing, like the back wall, the crowd in front of you it's just so immersive. And it's so much energy, such a buzz. I remember my mouth just got so dry at the first song, I'm like, *'Oh, there's no chance to drink the water, Fuck, keep it together, dude!'*"

LOOKS LIKE THE TABLES HAVE TURNED
LIKE THERE'S A CHANGE IN THE WEATHER
FEELS LIKE MY TIME IS RETURNING
LIKE I'M ABOUT TO GET OUT OF THIS CAGE

We're touring venues across the city today not just because of Rüfüs Du Sol's exceptionalism in live performance, but also because Los Angeles has become their second home. Perhaps by chance or fate. LA is also home to many of their most watershed concerts along their path from Sydney to wherever they are now. Their first club night at the seminal Echoplex ("You really had the world to gain," remembers Lindqvist wistfully, "and nothing to lose"). Theatre performances at The Fonda and Wiltern. Coachella 2016, 2017 and 2019. A free Santa Monica Pier show that broke capacity. Selling out the twenty-thousand-seat LA Historic Park. The ship has certainly sailed harbour, destination unknown.

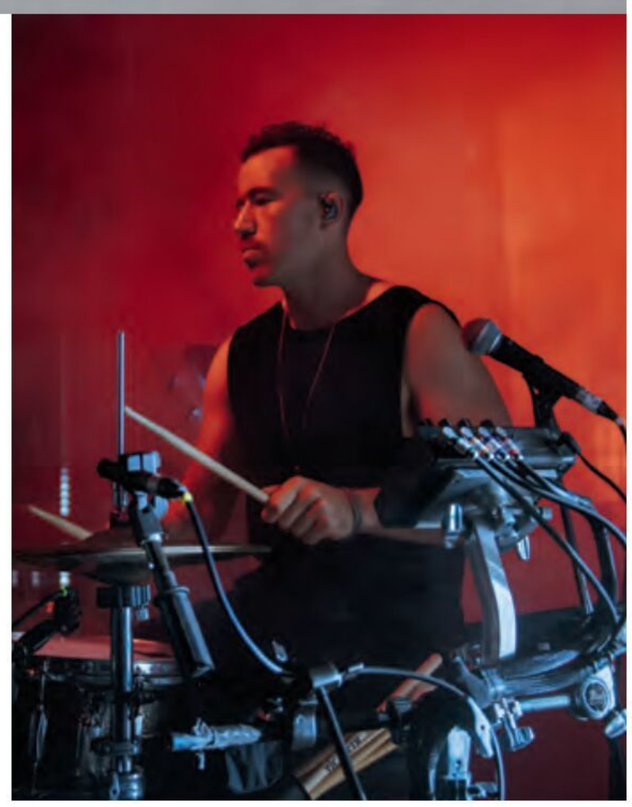
"The music is experiential for them, and therefore it should ideally be enjoyed in an experiential environment for us," offers Zane Lowe when asked about Rüfüs' live appeal. "They're trying to capture overarching moments in time rather than create single moments." The former BBC DJ first heard the band touring Australia with The Chemical Brothers, but really sank into them with his current role as Apple Music's Creative Director, where their global appeal became even more apparent.

"That's why they can sell out really large venues, because people want the experience they have when they listen to the album to continue into an event. People aren't going to the club to wait for that one song, they're going to the Hollywood Bowl to see how Rüfüs Du Sol bring that music to life," Lowe adds. "I don't look at them as just a playlist act, I look at them as an album act."

TOP: ELIOT LEE HAZEL, LIVE SHOTS: MICHAEL DRUMMOND

"I DON'T LOOK AT THEM AS JUST A PLAYLIST ACT, I LOOK AT THEM AS AN ALBUM ACT."

- ZANE LOWE



THEIR PRODIGIOUS live punch cannot be overstated. There are bands who excel in the studio, and are therefore considered studio bands — until you see them live, and are reminded *Oh, this is how they were meant to be heard*. Radiohead, Modeselektor and Pink Floyd come to mind. Not that Rüfüs have quite ascended to that level yet, but it's in play. This magnitude in performance bolsters the prescience the boys had in filming their *Live From Joshua Tree* extravaganza — the brainchild of Creative Director Katzki (aka George's brother Alexander). Katzki has been with the band since the beginning, helping mould their particular aesthetic; he conceptualised the band filming an audience-less concert displaying Rüfüs Du Sol's live chops without distraction, in a static but breathtaking natural landscape that both complements and contrasts the band's sweeping, gorgeous electronics: Nature meets Machine. But its timing was a thing of pure kismet, dropping just before the entire planet Earth shut its doors to the outside world, locking us all inside for seemingly endless months of forced solitude, loneliness and at times despair. Just as we were all dealing with never seeing a live show again (or at least anytime soon), here came Rüfüs with a high-def broadcast from the edge of nothingness.

LOOKS LIKE I'M ON MY KNEES AGAIN
FEELS LIKE THE WALLS ARE CLOSING IN

Sure, there are bottomless live shows one could cue up during lockdown, but something resonated singularly about there being no human beings to be seen except for this trio of Aussies. *Live From Joshua Tree* felt like it was filmed under strict social distancing protocols, no audience save an army of sentient blinking light bars sprinkled across the boulder-strewn Mojave. Connection via isolation, as if you were the only person Rüfüs Du Sol were performing for. Unsurprisingly the 45-minute clip spread like wildfire during the first few months of global lockdown, a streaming message of hope in a bottle.

To many it was a catharsis. A lighthouse. A beacon of music and solace and companionship beaming from the stark deserts of California. Or was it Mars? Who knew. Who cared. When it was impossible to dance with another human being, we'd sync up that set, press play at the same time, and experience it amongst friends spread across the city.

TOP: ELIOT LEE HAZEL, LIVE SHOTS: MICHAEL DRUMMOND

While in hindsight the idea seems obvious, it wasn't. The label didn't want to pay so the guys ponied up the money themselves (estimated between $100-$120K) to timestamp where they were at the time. It ended up being an absolute genius stroke of both art and marketing. Simply put, there is no way *Live From Joshua Tree* would have had the same global impact in any other era.

IF YOU WANT ME
IF YOU NEED ME
I'M YOURS

NEXT THING you know we're back in the shiny black SUV, bombing the ten freeway west from downtown to Venice Beach. The guys have agreed to slip in a new track, and they've pushed it to eleven. Heads are bobbing, Hunt subconsciously drums the syncopated beat on his lap. If they were at all initially hesitant that has vanished, and in its place an excitement for the reaction of new ears. I'm not special — the lads take great joy in playing their new songs for old friends, gauging reaction and absorbing energy from their enthusiasm.

"I like playing the music a little too loud so no one can talk," smirks George.

The track sounds superb. Most of the famed Rüfüs dynamics are there, the only sign of it being a demo are unprocessed vocals. It's a perfect soundtrack for this journey, one well-travelled by almost every Angeleno. Hazy memories of wandering home in the early morning from warehouse raves flash with pink and pastel blue silhouettes — the towering palm fronds that define LA's skyline.

Perhaps it's just coincidental that the music matches the city so well. At the same time, perhaps not. Because locality seems to be an integral component of the Rüfüs Du Sol experience. Consider their first album, *Atlas*, written and recorded entirely in Sydney (and unexpectedly debuting at number one). Their next, *Bloom*, was written and recorded in Berlin. Not an accident mind you — the guys decided that the Global Capital of Techno + Debauchery would lend their sophomore LP exactly what the German city offers. It too debuted atop the Australian album chart.

"We've enjoyed that process of relocating for different writing emotions," explains Hunt when the track is done playing. "We always set up a little DIY studio and I think that reinvigorates the writing process for us. And we're pretty lucky that we can work anywhere in the world, so we were just willing to take that opportunity."

Then came 2018's *Solace*, and the City of Angels. "When looking at the writing period for *Solace* I guess we'd spoken about it a bunch," says George, "but we decided to move to LA for the reasons of it being the mecca of so many industries, and we were excited to be able to connect with our producers and be closer to labels and stuff like that."

"Then we got this house in Venice," adds Lindqvist. "On Rose Avenue, which we're going to come up to, and we got swept up in the excitement of it all, and we were writing around the clock."

The SUV rolls to a stop in the heart of Venice Beach, off its Rose Avenue artery, and we all unload. Again, like at the Banc of California Stadium, the guys take a moment to drink it all in, sharing dumb and fun memories. This is where they found their home — a house with a soundproofed back studio, where Junkie XL lived before. It's where they found chaos, recklessness and unbalance. It's such an important locality for them, so seminal, that they named their record label after it: Rose Ave.

"The house to me holds both the most joy and exciting time in my life, and it also holds a lot of weight, like darkness," remembers Lindqvist. "The yin and the yang of this place, of my time there, it was a moment of transition. It was a place of opportunity. We knew L.A. was a washing machine, but were unaware that we were in the thick of the washing machine, which is exciting and fun. And we were working around the clock in this house with poor boundaries, poor communication and just no self-care. And it was a real period of becoming a bit more

self-aware and facing more of our insecurities and more of our demons basically, just facing the shadowy parts of ourselves. Our ego.

"And it was so fun, but there were some decisions that I made in my personal life that just caused me, and a few people around me, more pain than was necessary."

THERE'S A PAIN IN MY CHEST THAT I CAN'T DESCRIBE
IT TAKES ME DOWN, AND LEAVES ME THERE
WHEN I TALK TO THE NIGHT, I CAN FEEL IT STARE
IT CREEPS INSIDE... AND MEETS ME THERE

It's also where they transitioned from boys to men. A bunch of twenty-year-olds navigating the mega-waves of semi-rock-stardom, seasoned by its wipeouts and wary of its pitfalls, of being swept overboard and buried underwater. When discussing this era words like *unsustainable* are used by them all, again and again in different contexts. Of nonstop days-long marathon writing sessions, often drug-fueled, and the damage that that level of obsession can have on loved ones and oneself.

For what it's worth, George and Hunt seem to have grown more at peace with this time of iniquity in Venice. They have smiles when they share the stories and anecdotes, like the time Lindqvist dressed in all white, put a lampshade on his head Sharpied to look like producer Marshmello's goofy helmet, and knocked on the front door, somehow actually tricking Hunt into believing the superstar DJ was just swinging by.

"Yeah, I don't know how he fooled me," laughs Hunt, remembering that early morning visit with a bit of disbelief. "Maybe that says more about my state of mind than it does about anything else."

"Just to be blunt," adds Lindqvist, "we were not in a sober state."

On the other hand, some recollections seem to give Lindqvist a bit of anxiety. There's an edge there, as if he hasn't completely come to terms with the headiness of these days.

"I wish that I could have talked to myself earlier," Lindqvist will share with me a week later via Zoom. "I wish that I could have painted a different picture as to what a successful musician looks like. My idea of that was a life spinning out of control — it was the Kurt Cobains, the Rolling Stones, touring rock'n'roll, just being carefree, like not caring, not having feelings necessarily. Being a bit like, '*Fuck it, just going to do what I want*'. And I just wish that a different picture was painted: the other side of it, which is just that it's hard work. It's really fulfilling. You work with your closest friends, hopefully. The more you communicate and the better you communicate, the better you work, the more enjoyable it is to play shows, write music together."

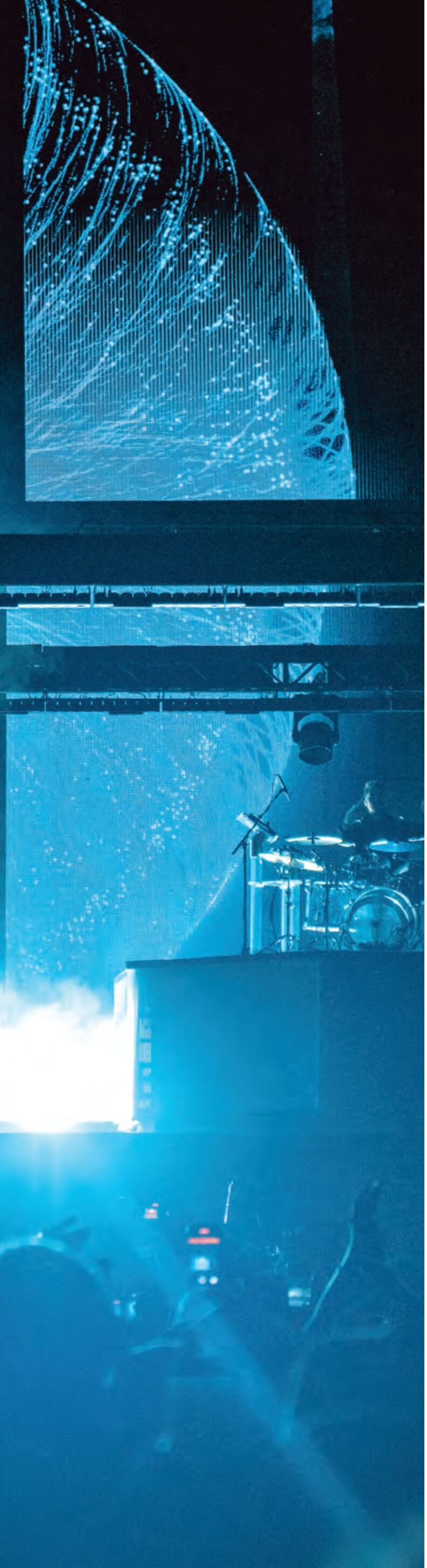
Barrels of digital ink have spilt outlining the trio's conflicts at that time, and the use of recording *Solace's* followup *Surrender* as a time of great growth — not just musically, but spiritually and socially. Finding ways to improve themselves individually, and leveraging that personal growth into tools to work better with one another. More than a passing thought, it's clear this was the central theme to the recording of *Surrender*, and can be seen in the title itself, as a time when the lads gave in to the process, wrestled with their egos, and found a way to love one another again — in the studio, on the stage and perhaps most importantly in the van, so to speak. The dark temptations of Venice were swapped for the clear skies of Joshua Tree. Tequila, spliffs and 6 a.m. recording sessions were exchanged for ginger shots, yoga mats, Wim Hof breathing techniques and post-show ice baths.

"Usually the story is that people drift apart — they make one amazing album and then splinter," shares Cassian, the accomplished Australian DJ and producer who has played an integral role as the band's engineer for a decade now. "I've worked with a lot of artists and the way Rüfüs communicates and resolves decisions as a unit in the studio together is amazing. They are three individual artists, and to come together and make one cohesive vision, to put that together is insanely difficult," he adds. "It's funny because they're all really different people, and the confidence and security within the group to be able to express your individuality, and not to be seen as a threat to each other or anything negative, is the biggest thing I've seen."

Confidence without ego is a terrifyingly difficult sweet spot to reach — for any human, not just a globetrotting musician. Wherever they're travelling there are lighthouses along the way, landmarks hinting the guys are sailing in the right direction. Their LA Historic Park show where their mums saw them play live in America for the first time and met them offstage, cheeks streaming tears of pride. Then there was Coachella 2019. "They just looked like fucking rockstars, and they're owning it, carrying themselves with the confidence and openness to step into that big role," recalls Cassian, watching them from the wings of the massive stage. "They've always been really ambitious, but there was a new level of it, and respect for it and taking it seriously, and willingness, that I think came with being in LA."

Then, on April 4th of this year, the three nervous Aussies sat at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas, and for the first time in three attempts heard their name called out to capture the Grammy for Best Dance/Electronic Recording for "Alive".

"When it was called out it was really weird — just the name, hearing it was like a lucid dream. Like, '*Wait what?*'," Lindqvist recalls from his beautiful new home in San Diego that he shares with his wife and infant son. "One of the things I experienced when we won was so much emotion and gratitude for the fact that we won it now and not when we were nominated for 'Underwater' and *Solace*. Of course I would've loved to have gotten a win there, but what this represents in terms of the time period, in terms of how the song came about, in terms of what we've done as individuals and as friends and as a band and the changes we've made... Whether it's the song, whether it's selling out A-B-C shows,



THE RÜFÜS REBRAND

After months of "colourful internal debate" before their first US release, RÜFÜS added DU SOL to its name in 2014 due to an existing trademark.

all of those things feel like high fives, because we are moving in a really positive direction as a band. And that made me really emotional; I was like, *'Oh, I'm so happy we got it now!'*, because had we gotten it three years ago it would've meant something very different."

Another sign. Another mariner's quadrant displaying the boys are sailing in the right direction, another reaf-firming constellation in the clear night sky.

AT LEAST I'M ALIVE, BELIEVE ME
I'M COMING BACK AGAIN
I WANNA MAKE IT RIGHT

"In the music industry it's always like the band blows up on their first album, and then sophomore syndrome, it just fades away," adds Cassian. "But their journey has been the opposite: everything's been organic, there's been a real culture. They've figured out how to keep it all together, keep the vision united which is the hardest thing, who has enjoyed a unique front row seat to the Rüfüs story over such a long period of time. "For all artists it should be so amazing and inspiring — like you don't need the number one instant hit, all the stuff the industry tells you you need. You just need to do good music, be consistent and just try to keep getting better and you'll be alright. And they're evidence of that."

Watching the boys recall hilarious anecdotes from their Venice days, it's impossible not to recognise the sense of comfort you see in well-established friend groups. There is an ease to these guys; you can't help but like them. There's a feeling they're on the other side of something big, perhaps even traumatic. But they've emerged from the storm, headed to something even bigger. A schooner that has weathered a hurricane, emerged from the darkness and Himalayan-sized waves by the seat of their pants. Not sure how they've survived, but they have. The horizon is clear. Dawn has broken over the bow of the Rüfüs Du Sol — perhaps with a gild-ed gramophone carved on as a nautical figurehead, but you get a feeling they were headed that way long before any award show. Perhaps they've figured out some kind of cheat code to touring band success, one ginger shot, one ice bath, one breath at a time.

"We're not alone in the process," Lindqvist tells me as he wraps up our Zoom call. "That's the biggest gift that we have. When I look at other solo artists, I'm like, *'Oh, how sad to have this wild ride of an experience and to not get to share it with people!',* because it's hard to know whether it was real," he relates wistfully, smiling. "Where-as I can look at the guys and go, *'Yeah, this, these things happened.'* And I really love that." ®

RÜFÜS DU SOL By The Numbers

15 **ARIA Award** nominations

3 **ARIA Award** wins

2015: Best Dance Release ("You Were Right")

2019: Best Dance Release ("Underwater")

2021: Best Group & Dance Release ("Alive")

2 **Grammy Award** nominations

1.75+ billion **Total Global Streams** (Spotify, Apple)

146 million **Times *Surrender* has been streamed across platforms**

36.6 million **Number of streams** for "Alive"

40 million **Number of streams** for "Next To Me"

49 million **Number of streams** for "On My Knees"

75,000 **Number of attendees across three nights** at Banc of California Stadium in Nov 2021

PHOTOGRAPHY ESSAY

Chris Cuffaro's photographs of INXS in 1988, and of the late Michael Hutchence in 1993, documented signpost moments in a career-defining era for the Sydney band.

CUFFARO'S UNPARALLELED ACCESS at the time, paired with his unique view of musicians themselves, captured two things: INXS' transition into global music heavyweights as they rode the tsunami of their 1987 album *Kick*, and Hutchence's enigmatic status as rock music's Australian sex symbol.

The record, which celebrates its thirty-fifth birthday this year, marks the band's highest and longest-charting album in the US. It saw four of its singles — "New Sensation", "Never Tear Us Apart", "Devil Inside", and "Need You Tonight" — hit the Top Ten in the US, with the latter marking the band's first and only chart-topper.

A creative genius who has clocked over three decades in the business as a photographer, director and producer, Chris Cuffaro is a rockstar in his own right. His lens has captured the likes of Nirvana, George Harrison, George Michael, Iggy Pop, Chris Cornell and Eddie Vedder, among many others; but it was this first encounter with INXS that led to some of history's most iconic photographs of Michael Hutchence. **POPPY REID**

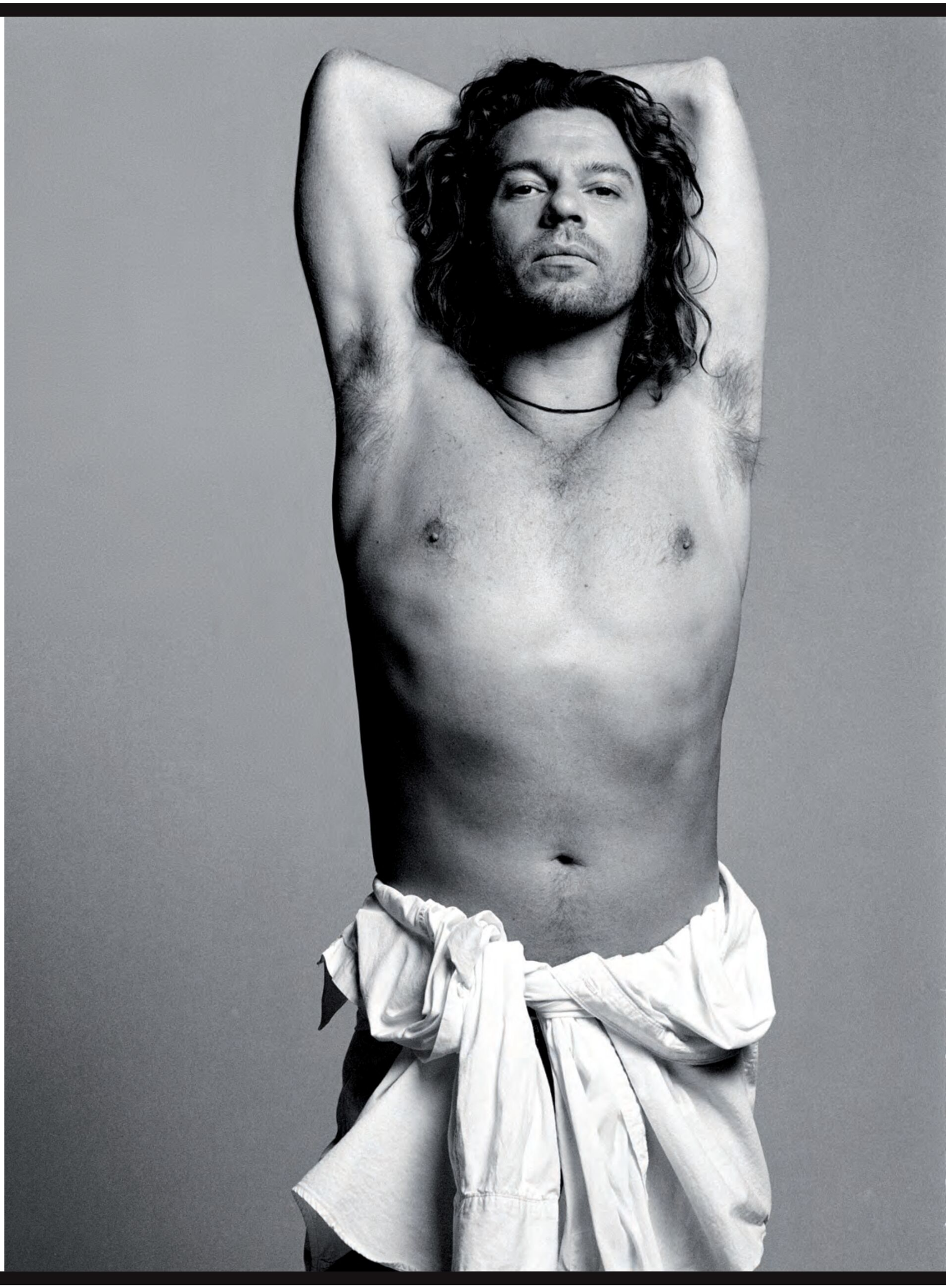
STAGE-READY
Ottawa Civic Centre, August 3, 1988

Chris Cuffaro took this shot right before INXS went onstage in Ottawa, Canada for the first show on the North American 'Calling All Nations' Tour. "I'm trying to walk backwards without falling on my ass — which I have done many times with bands," laughs Cuffaro.

Michael The Icon

Studio 46 in LA, October 1, 1993

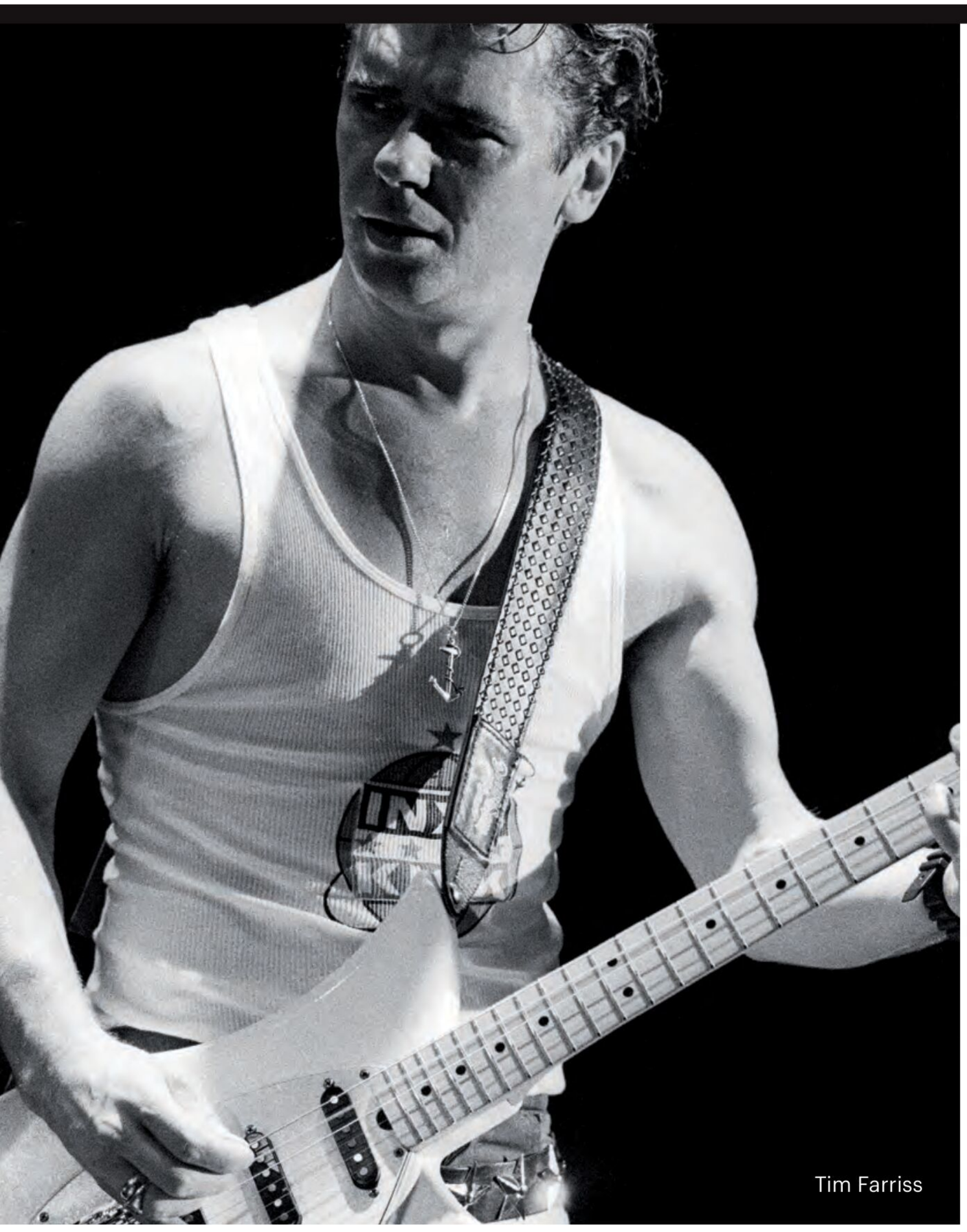
Cuffaro's solo sessions with Michael Hutchence for *Detour Magazine* spawned some of the most iconic photographs in music history. "The guy doesn't take a bad picture. It's that *less is more* thing, he doesn't have to try so hard, he just was truly him."



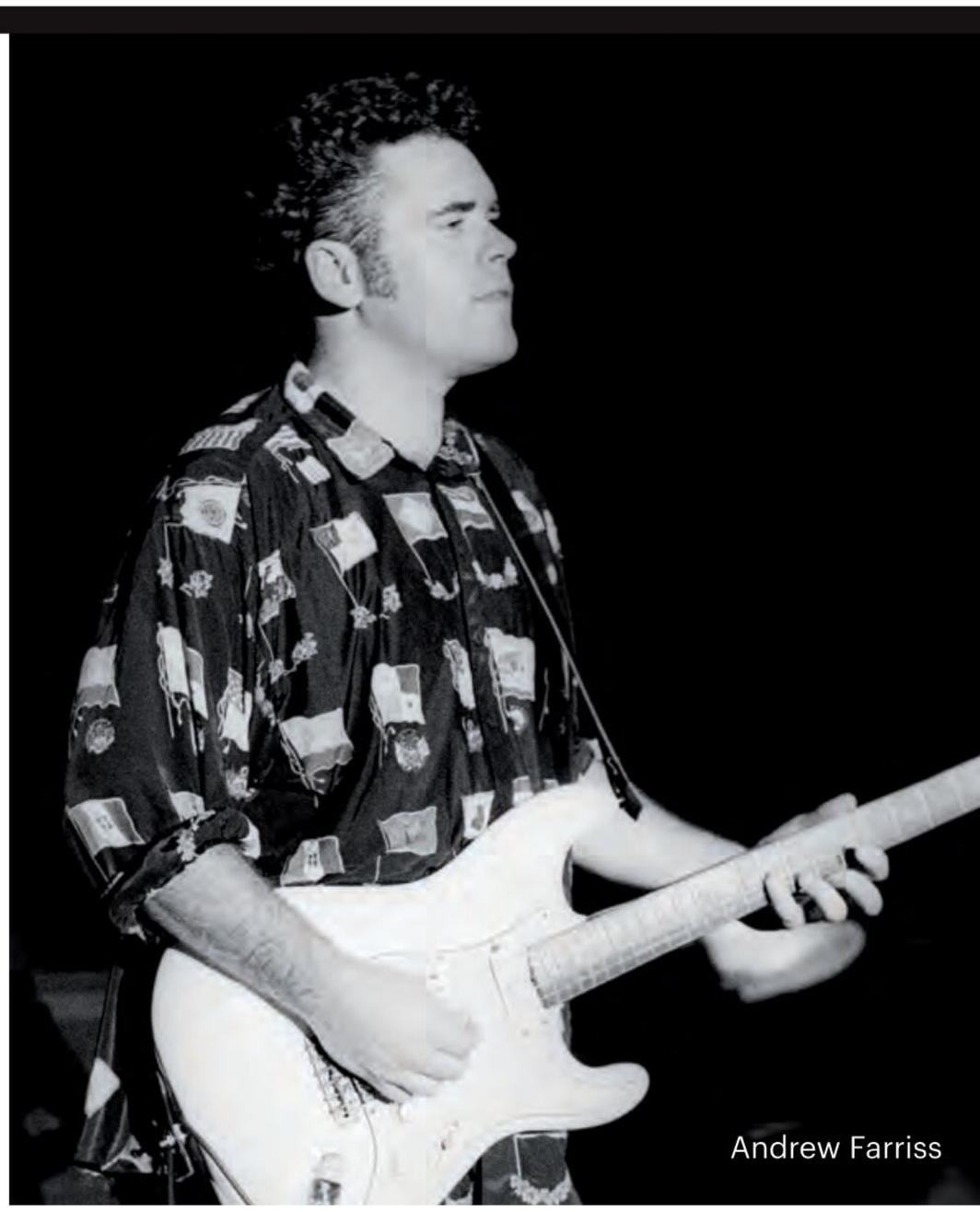
THE PROVOCATEUR
Studio 46 in LA, October 1, 1993

Cuffaro had learned of Hutchence's kinky side prior to the shoot, so brought along a leather mask and blindfold which he introduced right at the end of the session.

> "I pulled out the mask and the blindfold and he just grinned like a cheshire cat. He says, 'Yeah let's do this', and he put the mask on while smoking a cigarette. He just had fun with it."



Tim Farriss



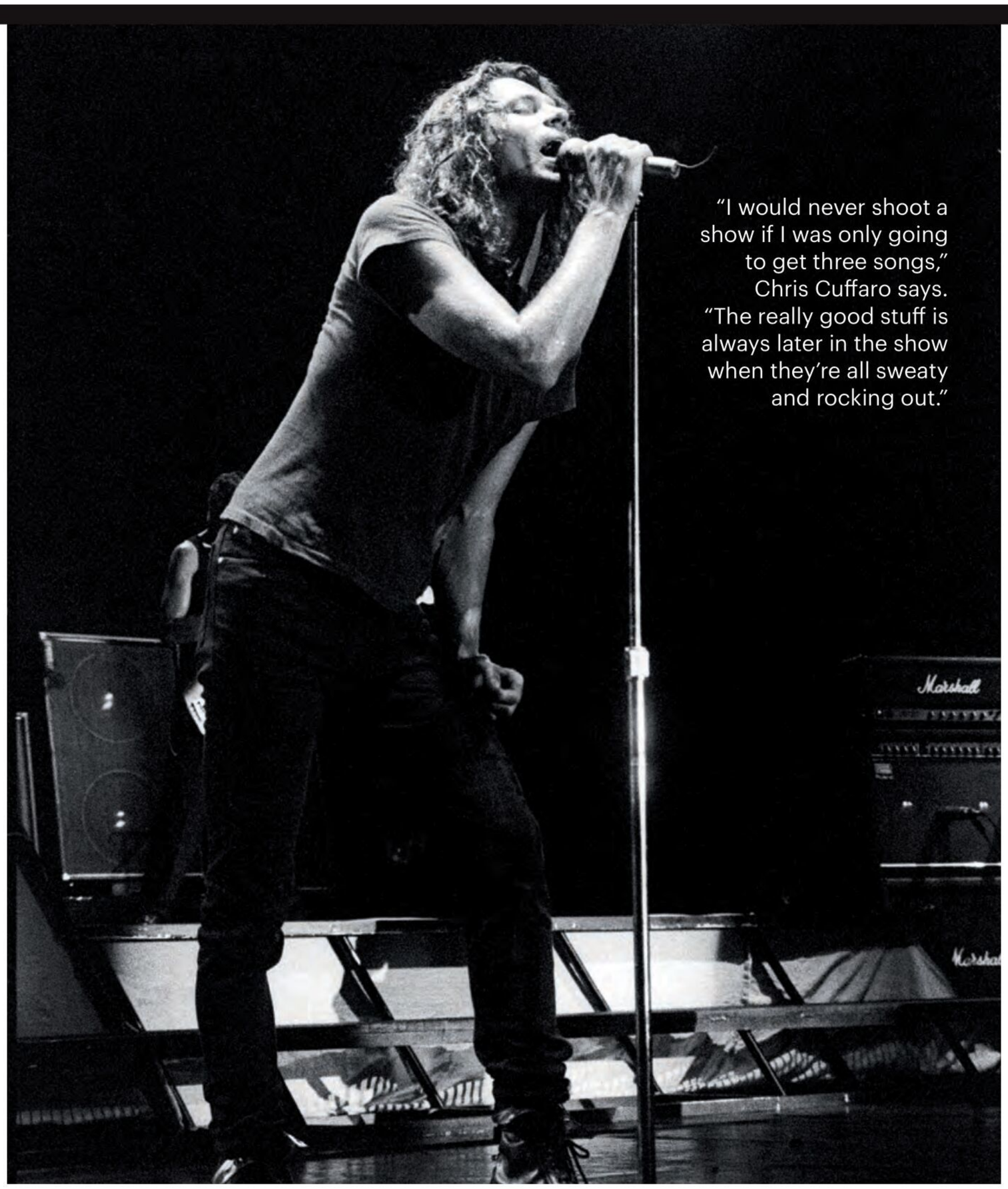
Andrew Farriss

Garry Gary Beers

Live Wires

Ottawa Civic Centre, August 3, 1988

Cuffaro's first and only time catching INXS live was from the pit at this show in Ottawa. As one of the few photographers who refuses to adhere to the 'three songs no flash rule', Cuffaro captured the band in various states of undress and frenzy.



"I would never shoot a show if I was only going to get three songs," Chris Cuffaro says. "The really good stuff is always later in the show when they're all sweaty and rocking out."

New Sensation

Ottawa Civic Centre, August 3, 1988

"I was blown away by Michael; the charisma was unreal," Cuffaro tells *Rolling Stone*. "You couldn't keep your eyes off of him. If there were other guys in the band I didn't notice them."

Kirk Pengilly

Jon Farriss

DEARLY BELOVED
Studio 46 in LA, October 1, 1993

Taken four years before Michael Hutchence's untimely death on November 22, 1997, this photograph for *Detour Magazine* expresses his loveable yet mystifying side, something which is still being unpacked to this day.

> "It didn't matter if I was shooting him or just hanging out," says Cuffaro, "he was the same... nice. I miss him to this day, just like everyone else."

By **JAKE CHALLENOR**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **BLAKE MORROW**

Can Drag **Race QUEENS** Reach **Pop Stardom?**

A DORE DELANO

P RIYANKA

C OURTNEY ACT

IN WALKS A confident six-foot, thirty-something man sporting a pair of enlarged silicone breasts strapped around his flat bare chest. His bleach blonde beehive wig is carefully glued to his ordinarily bald head. People do a double-take, wondering if, perhaps, it's Dolly Parton. He's now seated inside a theatre, shoulder to shoulder with the world's top pop stars. Spotlights swirl around the room to build anticipation. It's another awards night on Hollywood's calendar. But Trixie Mattel, real name Brian Firkus, isn't nominated.

Drag queens are used to being snubbed by the establishment, it's par for the course.

Despite building a multi-million-dollar empire spanning makeup to music; despite his multiple appearances on *RuPaul's Drag Race* and as a judge on *Queens of the Universe*; and despite three studio albums, including a number one single on Billboard's Heatseeker chart, Trixie Mattel remains a head-scratching example of the genderfuck snobbery that still exists in society – and in the global music industry – to this very day.

It really needn't bother him though. Trixie Mattel is one of the world's biggest, most successful drag artists. Firkus is estimated to be twirling on a net worth of some US$10 million. The only drag queen sitting on a greener patch is the mother of all queens, RuPaul Charles, who recently labelled Firkus "so rich" during a volley with Jimmy Kimmel.

Now in its fourteenth season, *Drag Race* is the gift that keeps on giving. The Emmy award-winning reality competition sees queens compete for the title of America's "next drag superstar" and a $150,000 cash prize. It turned Firkus into a pop culture icon following his stint on Season 7, and as the winner of All Stars Season 3.

Right before surgical face masks and clunky check-in apps became mainstream, Firkus released Trixie Mattel's third studio album. *Barbara* proved that the indie-folk singer-songwriter had matured into a bonafide musician worthy of the kind of playlist support afforded to his non-gender-bending peers. Blink-and-you'll-miss-it, the album even debuted at twenty-one on the Australian Recording Industry Association's official digital albums chart upon its release in February, 2020. That's one small step for man, one giant leap for drag queens. But, alas, the album still failed to reach the heights that many hoped it would, and some believed it should.

The global success of the *Drag Race* franchise has spawned a diverse sisterhood of queens who are puncturing pop culture, often one death drop – or song – at a time. Releasing a music video within hours of elimination has become almost mandatory for the contestants, a rite of passage even. Most of these bite-sized bops are trap-infused club bangers with comical hooks that parody the dramatic storylines from their season on the show. It's a strategy that keeps the queens relevant and connected to 'Racer' stans in the wake of their exits. They aren't Grammy worthy, or even chart worthy, but they do serve a purpose and a community.

So too do the songs created on *RuPaul's Drag Race* as part of the format's many music-based challenges set by the show's host and cocreator, RuPaul. Often these "maxi challenges" involve the contestants writing and recording a sassy and self-indulgent verse designed to show the judges – Michelle Visage, Carson Kressley and Ross Mathews – why they deserve to survive another week. A guest producer then slices and dices those vocals into a remake of one of RuPaul's songs with as much autotune as is needed to make it TV-ready. A handful of these tracks become hits in their own right, catapulting queens onto digital charts around the world.

The queens vying to win the crown in Season 13 did exactly that after the top seven were challenged by 'Mama Ru' to each write and perform an original verse to his new song, "Condragulations". One of those queens was Fred Carlton, better known as Liv Lux, one of the few from his season who can sing, dance and play an instrument.

"I went to school for musical theatre," Carlton tells *Rolling Stone* over a video call from his apartment in Brooklyn – also home to one of the largest drag scenes in the U.S. "Music has always

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JAKE CHALLENOR *is Editor of Rolling Stone AU/NZ Magazine, and Executive Editor of Variety Australia, The Music Network and The Industry Observer.*

RIXIE

IV LUX

"I think drag is bridging a gap in the arts." - LIV LUX

been a part of my life. I think drag is bridging a gap in the arts, essentially the arts in its entirety.

"*Drag Race* is such a huge platform. I think it's one of the biggest, if not the biggest drag stage in the world - you have so many different iterations now," he says while adjusting his beanie. Carlton leans into the laptop with a defiant spark in his eye: "I love that there are so many different versions, and so many different languages, to be able to relate to all these people."

Carlton isn't prepared to put drag, or Liv Lux, in a box. "There doesn't have to be a category for everything all the time. And that's why we're here right now. We're talking about drag and music," he says, referring to his new single "It's the Music", a soulful and jazzy pop doozie featuring Carlton's familiar soft vocals barely floating above the keys. "Quite frankly, there isn't a category. We're here to pave and make that way for no category, point-blank."

AUSTRALIA'S BIGGEST DRAG export, Courtney Act, was among the first group of queens to have a musical body of work ready for the world to hear after leaving *Drag Race*. Courtney Act also had an advantage. She was previously signed to a big label, and remains the only drag queen in Australian history to have inked a deal and released music through a major record company.

"The trend of releasing music after *Drag Race* started with Sharon Needles releasing her album after she won Season 4, and then probably Adore [Delano] and I, in Season 6," says Shane Jenek, the one time *Australian Idol* favourite who continues to wow audiences around the globe as a reality TV regular, theatrical performer and pop star. Even Kylie Minogue and Lady Gaga have publicly endorsed Courtney Act's music.

"I remember always having dreams of pop music and loving pop, wanting to be a Spice Girl, and releasing music over the years. I mean, my first single with BMG was in 2004 and I was twenty-two.

"I remember people at the record company saying, 'You don't know what you want or who you are'. And I think they were probably right," Jenek admits. He's at home in Melbourne and is using the break after filming another reality show (*Dancing with the Stars: All Stars*) to catch up on the latest episode of *Euphoria*.

"The thing about drag is that we're already artists," says Jenek. He's seated on the couch wearing a crisp white singlet and shorts – a stark contradiction to the glamourous and energetic persona of Courtney Act. "We're already producing and creating our content. And I think maybe the issue with mainstream music is that drag queens are, by definition, defiant. We already did what we weren't supposed to do because it was who we are and what we love. And I mean, artists, in general, fit that mould as well. But I think drag queens have this ability to stand alone.

"Girls who have been on *Drag Race*, certainly, we get to tour the world and fly business class and get paid lots of money to do great gigs and do all that stuff. I think some queens probably don't want a label to do a three-sixty deal on them and take a whole chunk of their money, because they're already getting a lot more than they would get. But it's interesting, because you don't have that mainstream crossover. There are these artists who are literally making millions and millions of dollars. I can't even name them all."

Jenek would love to be on all the mainstream pop charts, but feels like that bird has flown for most artists: "I mean, I know there's obviously mainstream pop hits, but I think the cool thing about *Drag Race* is that all of us who have had music success and any other sort of success, really, we have these cult audiences."

Performers aren't just shunned for being drag queens, they are also fighting the stigmas imposed on them by the music industry – and, sadly, even some fans – for being on reality television. But can you think of a better platform from which drag artists should launch their careers? Jenek has made a living out of it. He first appeared on Season 1 of *Australian Idol* in 2003, then *RuPaul's Drag Race*, plus two stints on *Dancing with the Stars*. He even won *Celebrity Big Brother* in the UK.

For the handful of queens like Jenek and Carlton that do identify as musicians and recording artists, the fact that Firkus et al aren't

being snapped up by major record labels and 'livin' la vida loca' atop the pop charts, remains utterly "shocking". Firkus' alter ego Trixie Mattel is primed for pop stardom, and the queens walking a similar runway in the music industry remain hopeful that his alter ego continues to break barriers and open tightly guarded doors for the next generation of queens.

"Trixie Mattel truly is one of the most famous people on this planet," says Priyanka, the inaugural winner of Canada's *Drag Race*, who thinks the accessibility of media-savvy drag queens might be hindering their chances of success. "How do you get the mystery machine to meet up with this accessible machine, to want to throw Trixie and Priyanka on the charts?"

Toronto-based Priyanka, real name Mark Suknanan, has spent the past few years rebranding from a locally known children's television host into a fully-developed drag queen. That transition has proven mighty fruitful. After Suknanan won *Canada's Drag Race*, he turned to music and last July released his debut EP *Taste Test*. It won over fans and introduced him to new ones around the world, including in Australia where Priyanka will tour this October. He was even offered a record deal prior to the release of *Taste Test*, but ultimately turned it down in favour of controlling his own destiny – a growing trend among drag queens that feel flouted by the music business.

"I'm obsessed with Olivia Rodrigo, Tate McRae and Billie Eilish," he confesses to *Rolling Stone*. "I'm sitting at home being like, 'Why am I obsessed with all these little white girls? What's wrong with me?!' And then I dug deeper into my Beyoncé obsession and my Normani obsession. The reason why these people are so successful is that pop stars are mysteries, and drag queens are almost too accessible.

"Like Beyoncé's famous line, 'Of course sometimes shit goes down when there's a billion dollars on an elevator'. If that's the only time Beyoncé is commenting on it, that's the gateway to the soul. But if you're on reality TV and you're speaking your heart online every day, and your music doesn't hold a little bit of a diary, do people care? Does a record label care?"

Riding high on his post-*Drag Race* fame and a viral music video, Suknanan was already reluctant when he met with a major label. His fanbase is already hooked, and it's growing. If the label couldn't guarantee success by way of playlists and promotion, then what was the point? They both agreed there was none, and Priyanka got the last laugh.

"Those are the two things I think about as a self-funded artist," he says. "A label holds the nominations at award shows, a label holds Billboard spots all over the world for your music to be out there. A label can do so many things for you. But for me, I like doing it by myself, but I do want to get to a place where partnering, not signing, with a label is going to just explode me beyond the drag world," he tells *Rolling Stone* from his 'Drag Room'. Amidst the array of wigs and memorabilia scattered behind him, two items stand out. The first is a jaw-dropping gown worn during a Season 2 cameo on *Canada's Drag Race* (the outfit pays homage to his heritage). The second is even harder to miss, a theme park carousel on which he performed his single "Country Queen" at the 2021 CCMA Awards in London

Suknanan splashed more than $100,000 on *Taste Test*, often calling upon sponsors to help fund the "expensive" overheads associated with being one's own label. The EP included collaborations with Racer alumni, including *Drag Race UK* fan favourite Cheryl Hole ("Snatch") and, from his own season, Lemon ("Come Through"). The latter spawned a viral hit after it was shared online - the official music video has over 1.4 million views and the song has surpassed four million streams on Spotify, and climbing.

It's evident that Priyanka means business. The thirty-year-old even flicked her drag agent in lieu of a more seasoned music manager to help steer her career in the direction of pop stardom. That's something that Adore Delano, with multiple albums and tours under her belt, has managed to achieve. Daniel Noriega, like Jenek, had previously won hearts on the *Idol* franchise in his native America. But it was his Season 6 stint with Jenek on *Drag Race* that kicked off a successful, sustainable and independent career in the music industry. But will we live to see a drag queen achieve superstar status akin to that of Minogue or Gaga? And will it happen without the type of major label backing that many still believe is required in the world of popular, mainstream music?

"It's totally a fair assessment," admits Noriega, who is visiting Australia's east coast in November with a full band as part of his 'Party Your World' tour. "As I said, we're not there right now. It's a very picky and choosy industry. We're not presenting awards at the Grammys. We're not performing at the Grammys. We're not nominated for Grammys. We're just not there yet. It's still a bit taboo, but we're killing it, man. We got the fans to back it up.

"There's a lot of girls that actually have the chops now with the writing ability, and are pumping out some really decent music. It was a bit different when I first started just pumping out the videos. It was just like a few of us. We were making the charts, but we weren't the frontliners. I've just noticed a big wave of change over the past five to six years.

"I think we're at a time right now where *Drag Race* is just such a huge phenomenon that it's only just starting to open the mainstream door. I don't think we're one million per cent there yet, to be honest. I think we're on our way, and there's nothing wrong with a ladder. We can climb."

> "We're not nominated for Grammys. We're just not there yet. It's still a bit taboo, but we're killing it, man." - PRIYANKA

PRIYANKA: GAY TIMES

PRIYANKA

THE Lavish, TOP-SECRET WORLD of PRIVATE GIGS

These days, everyone from Pitbull to Beyoncé will play for hire — for the right price

BY DAVID BROWNE

ILLUSTRATION BY LARS LEETARU

FOR JENNIFER LOPEZ, a November 2014 performance in Macau wasn't entirely out of the ordinary. She'd have to sing (here, to a backing track) for forty minutes, accompanied by six to eight dancers; the contract stipulated she'd be furnished with "first-class" sound and lights. No recording or taping of the performance would be allowed. ★ But no tickets were sold, either. And the payday stood out, too: $1.25 million. To celebrate the birthday of a relative, a wealthy Chinese family flew Lopez to Asia to perform for them, tossing in $500,000 for airfare and hotel. The opulence didn't stop there; for the show, the family built a restaurant and a nightclub inside a Grand Hyatt ballroom, with a walkway connecting the two. And all for about twenty people in the audience, less than the number of crew members involved in working on the gig.

For more than twenty years, pop stars of all genres and generations, from Bob Dylan and the Eagles to Alicia Keys and John Legend, have been hired to play corporate events – big-paycheck performances for company employees or clients, often at theaters or arenas. Even during a pandemic, when live performances slowed down, that ecosystem has persisted. Last December, the blockchain-gaming platform Gala Games threw a "Galaverse" multinight private party in San Francisco, where its five-hundred guests gathered to hear Maroon 5, Alice Cooper, DJ Steve Aoki, a bit of Snoop Dogg, and a stripped-down set by two members of Arcade Fire. The venue included private rooms set up to look like a medieval tavern, a "Dungeons & Dragons" setup with a huge fake dragon, and a quasi Texas dance hall, while in another space, dancers were made up to look like zombies (to tie in with a *Walking Dead* game).

But alongside the world of corporate parties and retreats, a far more shadowy parallel world has been flourishing: the super-private gig. In that universe, stars in classic rock, hip-hop, and pop have been pulling in sizable fees for playing at weddings, birthday parties, anniversaries, and other personal-life milestones, all for those wealthy enough to afford it. The festivities allow performers to walk away with yacht-loads of cash and make one-percenter hosts feel like insiders and stars themselves. But along with the sizable paydays come sometimes dicey political issues that the artists have to navigate (or, sometimes, ignore).

In the early days of this industry, the only performers who would bite were oldies acts from the Fifties or Sixties. But today, the list of artists who've taken the money and played now reads like a pop chart. Fork over the right amount, as much as seven figures, and Beyoncé or Rod Stewart might play for your friends and family. The lineup includes veterans like John Mayer and newcomers like Charlie Puth (who was a surprise guest at a teenager's bat mitzvah in Boston). Sugar Ray are available, as is the semi-supergroup Ezra Ray Hart, composed of Sugar Ray's Mark McGrath, Tonic frontman Emerson Hart, and Better Than Ezra's Kevin Griffin, who will rock your house with a slew of Nineties hits. Pitbull, Nicki Minaj, and Flo Rida have played bar or bat mitzvahs.

In a sign of generational changes, old-school hip-hop acts like Coolio, Too Short, Vanilla Ice, and Naughty by Nature have also been hired for such up-close-and-personal shows. "We're seeing a lot of people who host a big-name artist in their mansions," says Jay Siegan, whose company, Jay Siegan Presents, has helped book major acts like Coldplay and Celine Dion for corporate events. "They do it discreetly and for thirty to fifty friends, and they'll have a million-dollar artist perform 45 minutes before they have a celebrity chef prepare a dinner. That's the kind of thing we've seen more and more of."

Sugar Ray recently partook in a birthday party for a wealthy client in San Diego, who rented out a club for a few dozen of his friends. "You go out, you play for the forty people, and they're having drinks, having fun, going crazy," says McGrath, who says he earns roughly half of his annual income from such events. "Some of those, you have to work really hard; you're not getting the response you're used to getting in your hard-ticket shows, and it might hurt your ego a little bit. That's also a reason why you're getting paid three or four times what you normally get paid."

If none of this sounds familiar, there's a reason. In an atmosphere where poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth are part of the national conversation, a new degree of secrecy has kicked in. Few artists are willing to discuss these jobs, and the people who book the parties often sign agreements not to disclose any details about the performers, host, or locale. Meanwhile, the artists themselves aren't just cashing the checks but also grappling with who they play for and how much detail to reveal. "Some kind of opportunity was extended and we obliged," says one pop star of a recent event where he played. "The thing about private parties is, if you're not there, a lot of the details you don't really want to discuss too much. That's what allows it to maintain certain levels of exclusivity."

SUGAR RAY'S MCGRATH remembers the day he stumbled upon this new ecosystem. It was the late Nineties, the band's "Fly" was dominating the radio, and they were offered a gig playing for a tech company in the Bay Area. "They had all these lasers and six different rooms, with a DJ in one room, and about thirty disinterested people milling about," he recalls. "You've just kind of got to grind through it." But he also remembers the payday – "seven times what we'd ever seen before" – and how the show left a mark. "We said, 'This world is kind of fun,'" he says. "Back then, corporate parties or fairs were considered taboo – you were not cool if you did those things. We were *never* cool. So we didn't have anything to worry about."

That era, roughly twenty-five years ago, marked the dawn of the corporate gig for classic rock, when six- or seven-figure fees would entice Stewart, Billy Joel, or Crosby, Stills, and Nash to play a show for company employees at corporate behemoths like Pepsi and Bank of America. In 1998, thanks to a reported just-under-a-million-dollars paycheck, Bob and Jakob Dylan co-headlined a show (for the technology-hardware manufacturer Applied Materials) for the first and only time.

The dot-com boom of the early 2000s took the private-party circuit to a new level. Jesus Jones'

Senior writer DAVID BROWNE *chronicled a bizarre Seventies rock revue in the January issue.*

Party All the Time From top: Sugar Ray's Mark McGrath, a mainstay of the circuit since the late Nineties, when the band got an offer to perform for a Bay Area tech company; private-gig regular Lenny Kravitz at a Florida party that also featured lots of champagne and a set by T.I.; Jennifer Lopez at her controversial 2013 performance in Turkmenistan in Central Asia, for which her camp later apologized.

FROM TOP: SCOTT DUDELSON/GETTY IMAGES; ALEXANDER TAMARGO/GETTY IMAGES; IGOR SASIN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

"YOU WEREN'T COOL IF YOU DID CORPORATE PARTIES. WE WERE *NEVER* COOL. SO WE DIDN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO WORRY ABOUT." —MARK MCGRATH

Mike Edwards recalls the time his band, a decade after its heyday, was flown from the UK to the States to play a corporate conference – and all they had to do was play their lone hit, "Right Here, Right Now," at the beginning of the event. "The host said, 'Welcome, everyone, hope you have a good time, and here's Jesus Jones,'" Edwards recalls. "We played 360 seconds, and the costs were minimal. . . . There was always the subtle undertone of 'You're dancing with the devil,' or somehow you're a corporate whore. But we got to play a song of ours that we quite liked and come home with a load of money. You think, 'Why *wouldn't* you?'"

The 2008 crash put the brakes on these fees, but according to talent bookers, as the economy began to improve over the past decade, those events picked up where they left off, and the super-private category – where the well-off are able to bring in a rock legend here, a pop icon there, to commemorate a special life moment – began to ramp up. Seal played aboard a yacht off the coast of Monaco for the members of a family who own a prominent airline. In 2018, Beyoncé was reportedly paid in the millions at the wedding of the children of two Indian billionaires. Around the same time, a one-percenter financier based in Utah constructed a full-on concert stage in his backyard to host former Bad Company singer Paul Rodgers. The host spent more than $1 million to fly in chefs from the O2 arena in London, and turned his multicar garage into an industrial kitchen. Due to the altitude, EMTs supplied with oxygen tanks were also on hand.

The Rodgers event was organized by Element Lifestyle, a private firm that charges its high-end clients a $48,000 yearly membership to help them with travel and vacation arrangements – and, increasingly, music events. In one of those deals, Ricky Martin was paid $500,000 to take the ten-minute drive from his Los Angeles home to sing at a wedding. A client from Iran, a fledgling singer himself, had a lifelong dream to duet with Andrea Bocelli, and for around $1 million, the crooner was flown in from Italy to join the host onstage in Los Angeles. Another client paid for Bocelli to make a surprise visit to his company's retreat in Italy. "In the pre-Covid world, there were clients who love music and love the live-music experience but don't necessarily love the thousands of people they're surrounded by," says Element Lifestyle founder Michael Albanese. "So this idea of creating an experience in their backyard or their home started to really take off."

According to Robert Norman, a CAA agent who helped pioneer this music ecosystem decades ago, another rich dude built "unique venues" for multiple party nights at his home. "We're not talking about putting up a tent," says Norman, who declines to mention the name of the host or the acts who played. "These were tiki lodges and a New Orleans-style blues house."

Not everyone accepts the offers. According to a source, a one-percenter was willing to pay $250,000 to ride motorcycles with Bruce Springsteen or hire him for a private concert. Springsteen supposedly declined. U2 are requested regularly, but according to Siegan, "U2 is one where I just have to tell my clients no." But those acts are increasingly in the music-world minority. "Some artists make their fees so high that people will say no to it," says Albanese. "But everyone has a price at the end of the day."

In 2018, during the prepandemic party gold rush, Bob McLynn of Crush Management, which handles Fall Out Boy, private-party regulars Train, and others, was taking his boat out for a spin off the Jersey shore when he came across dozens of boats parked in the water. Nearby was a carnival, complete with a Ferris wheel. "I yelled to one of the boats, 'Who's playing over there?'" McLynn says. "The guy says, 'Who!' I said, 'Who's playing over there?' And he's like, 'The Who!'"

It was actually Roger Daltrey, performing with his own band in a tent for the New Jersey real-estate mogul Steve [*Cont. on 96*]

BY SIMONE AMELIA JORDAN

Shakaya: Dreamgirls

Celebrating two decades since the release of their self-titled debut album, the trailblazing First Nations duo behind Shakaya reflect on their hard-earned and well-deserved fame.

IN 2002, TWO YOUNG FIRST NATIONS women took the Australian music industry by storm.

In January of that year, Simone Stacey and Naomi Wenitong, known as pop R&B act Shakaya, dropped their first single, "Stop Calling Me", through Columbia/Sony. It peaked at number five on the ARIA Singles Chart, introducing the fresh-faced Cairns duo to a national audience. In a handful of months, the pair would unleash two more singles, go on tour with Destiny's Child, Kylie Minogue and Human Nature, and then, on October 18, release their Top Five self-titled album.

TWO DECADES LATER, Wenitong looks back on that whirlwind period by going back even further. She reflects on when a primary school teacher asked her to record her dreams. "I wrote down all this stuff with music. I even wrote that I wanted to sign with Sony because I saw the label name on the back of my CDs. Look, they were outrageous dreams, okay? But by the time I was twentytwenty, I'd crossed everything off my list."

NUNO PHOTOGRAPHY

Shakaya's
Naomi Wenitong

Wenitong was in her teens when she met Stacey, then twenty-one, through a Certificate IV music course for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at Cairns TAFE in 1999. The girls bonded over their shared Murri heritage – Stacey is from the Juru clan under the Birrigubba nation, while Wenitong's family is from the Kabi Kabi tribe – and they both have South Sea Islander and European ancestry (Naomi is also part-Nepalese). So they joined forces to tackle assessments, including writing original music and performing their songs live.

"The course was perfect for us, for the way that we learn," Wenitong says. Eager to nurture their developing sound, a family friend encouraged them to visit the newly-opened, multi-million dollar Megatrax Studio, owned by local nightclub impresario Reno Nicastro.

The girls set up a meeting with Nicastro to pitch themselves as backing vocalists for visiting artists. "We went up there with a demo we'd recorded in my Dad's set-up – it was so crap," Wenitong laughs.

"I remember the day the girls walked in so clearly," Nicastro says. "Naomi was a kid. They gave me a cassette tape with their music on it. I liked the songs, so I said, let me reproduce them. I'll get you into the studio properly to sing. And that's what I did."

A former musician raised in Innisfail by Italian-born parents, Nicastro concedes to having a soft spot for the girls from when they met. "I love them both; they're like my little sisters." So he agreed to let them record new music at Megatrax, an offer they keenly accepted until they realised how much studio time might cost. Stacey recalls that feeling of heartache.

"I was twenty-one years old, mum to a three-year-old boy. I was also going through a very tough relationship, domestic violence, etc. Reno was giving us our big break, but we had no way to make it happen."

Wenitong adds, "We were broke as. I worked at a coffee shop, so I called Reno from a payphone on one of my breaks. I had two dollars. Two dollars wasn't a lot for a payphone call, so I tried to speak quick! I let Reno know we didn't have money to pay for studio time, but he surprised me."

Nicastro asked Wenitong what her weekly pay was. "It was like three-hundred bucks a week, so I said, 'I'll give you that amount'," he remembers. "You'll come to the studio and write every day for a year, and we'll see where it goes. I said the same to Simone. I told them it was like fishing: one day you've got nothing, the next day you've got something. So that's how we started."

The trio agreed on the name Shakaya. With Nicastro acting as producer and manager, they spent twelve months working on what would become their debut album. "We wanted to keep creative control. We'd lose that if we'd recorded it with a label," Wenitong says. "We write our songs. For me, writing is the main thing. It's not worth getting up in front of everyone if I'm not singing or rapping what I want to say."

SHAKAYA with their then-tour manager, Vanessa Lau and Destiny's Child.

WHEN IT CAME time for them to perform, Nicastro organised a gig at one of his Cairns nightspots, Club Tropo. He invited several industry friends to the performance, including TV host Richard Wilkins who later became their co-manager.

"I remember driving home at two in the morning and calling my friend Peter Andre. I said, 'Brother, what have I done? Have I just wasted a lot of money and a whole year of my life?"
- Reno Nicastro

Shakaya's first night on stage didn't go as well as Nicastro had hoped. "I watched them perform, and I noticed how quickly they lost their breath. The girls weren't used to singing and dancing at the same time. So I go, 'Fuck, this is no good!' I remember driving home at two in the morning and calling my friend Peter Andre. I said, 'Brother, what have I done? Have I just wasted a lot of money and a whole year of my life?' He said, 'No, brother, they just need to be trained'."

At Andre's suggestion, in mid-2001, Nicastro booked and paid for Shakaya to spend three months in Orlando, Florida, at Lou Pearlman's Trans Continental Studios. Pearlman had helped launch the careers of Backstreet Boys, Britney Spears, NSYNC and O-Town (he was later convicted on numerous crimes, including conspiracy and money laundering and spent eight years in jail before dying in federal custody in 2016). The renowned boot camp involved dance and voice lessons, media training and trainer-led workouts to prepare them for stardom. But for the first time, Stacey and Wenitong found themselves dealing with self-doubt.

"There we were, in this rehearsal studio with giant mirrors, and I couldn't even look at myself. I felt so uncomfortable. I wanted to go home and cry to my mummy because I was just so *shame*," Wenitong says, adding that her worst fear was coming across as conceited.

"Our choreographer, a Black guy, cut the music, stopped everything, and said, 'I don't know what happened to you girls in your country, but no one wants to see shy little girls on stage'. He said, 'Tell me what you're thinking right now'. I said, 'I just feel like the audience will think that I think I'm good'. Then he goes, 'This is the thing – you *are* fucking

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good. That's why you're here, and they're not. You should be embarrassed *not* to be on stage showing off'. And that mindset helped redirect the shame. I'll never forget that."

Towards the end of their time in Orlando, Nicastro was in serious talks with Pearlman and Los Angeles-based music industry figure Lionel Conway to sign Shakaya and introduce them to the American market. Then, with some crucial meetings already lined up, September 11 happened.

"It destroyed everything," he says. "The girls were freaking out over there, and no one knew if the world was about to end." So Nicastro called Wilkins back in Sydney. "I said, 'Brother, let's just go and do a deal with Sony. You know Denis (Handlin), go play him the songs."

Wilkins lived in The Connaught building overlooking Hyde Park, a short three minute walk to Sony Music's Australian headquarters on Hargreave Street in East Sydney. The TV host called the former Sony Music Australia chief and asked for five minutes of his time. "Why?" Handlin asked, before agreeing to Wilkins' request to play him one song.

ABOVE: Shakaya with their former co-managers Richard Wilkins and Reno Nicastro.

LEFT: Shakaya at MTV Australia.

ABOVE: Shakaya at Trans Continental Studios in Orlando, FL.

> **"I didn't click on it till later on; when you look at the songs that didn't make the album, they're all the ones about being Blak in Australia."**
> **- Reno Nicastro**

"So I raced across the road and into his office, popped the cassette tape in and turned "Stop Calling Me" up nice and loud. Handlin instantly declared it 'a hit record'. Wilkins already knew it, of course: "I know, so what are we gonna do?" Handlin agreed to make a record deal happen.

"So I ran back and called Reno," recalls Wilkins, laughing at the memory, who told the duo's producer, "I think we just got the world's fastest record deal."

THE FIRST SONG the trio had recorded together, and released through Sony only one year later, "Stop Calling Me" would reach number five on the ARIA singles chart and go on to platinum sales. Nicastro remembers making the beat one morning and handing it over to the girls at lunchtime. The duo had finished the lyrics, melodies, and vocals by that afternoon. "We split songs up and agree on who does the first and second verse, then come back together for the chorus and the bridge," Stacey says. "We both bring melodies to the table, then vibe off them and decide where to place them in the song."

Stacey, the more introverted of the pair, describes the year they spent promoting their debut album, against the backdrop of her complicated personal life, as challenging. "I'd get bad anxiety in Shakaya and have extreme panic attacks," she reflects. "Before one gig in Melbourne, I froze and felt crippled. It felt like an electric current rushing from the top of my head to my feet, which felt like lead. I couldn't breathe; I couldn't talk." Wenitong would have to talk her through it each time, helping with breathing exercises and "reminding me why we were doing it."

That purpose was paramount. The girls were mindful of their elevated platform and spoke openly and proudly of their heritage in interviews. Naturally, they sprinkled their identity into the music ("We had didgeridoo samples, a little bit of Creole in some of the raps," Stacey says). But they didn't understand why none of their conscious songs had made the album.

"We didn't push the issue because we'd only just started. I was still a teenager; I wasn't even confident I was writing good songs," Wenitong says. "I didn't click on it till later on; when you look at the songs that didn't make the album, they're all the ones about being Blak in Australia, all about going against the grain. It's much more accepted now to talk about it."

Following the success of their debut album, Shakaya released the follow-up, *Are You Ready*, in March 2006. They decided, amicably, to go their separate ways not long after its release.

"The girls, Reno and myself never really said goodbye; it just sort of petered out for one reason or another," Wilkins recalls. "No one had a falling out; it got a bit hard after a while. With no disrespect to the label, what drives them is a success. And once those hits stop coming, they lose a bit of interest."

Nowadays, Stacey and Wenitong work closely with their community: Stacey runs No Shame In My Game, a music program for young girls and teenage mothers. Similarly, Wenitong's Naytive Mentorship offers songwriting workshops and professional development for emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musicians.

To celebrate the album's twentieth anniversary, Shakaya is preparing a documentary, dropping previously unreleased tracks and performing gigs around the country. They are embraced as mentors by the current crop of First Nations female artists, including Malyangapa and Barkindji rapper Barkaa.

"Barkaa is so authentic, man," Wenitong enthuses. "Watching her lets us see we've come so far. Of course, there's still a long way to go, but I'm so proud of this next generation of mob. The way they're operating in this country makes me so happy. We're gonna be fine." ®

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INRUPT

Rage *Against the* MACHINE

How the inventor of the web is trying to save it.

By James Shackell

THE MAN WHO invented the Web is on mute. I can see his mouth moving, but no sound comes out. It's nice to know this sort of thing happens to once-in-a-generation geniuses, too.

"Ah, there we are," he says, "I'm back."

Sir Timothy Berners-Lee – OM, KBE, FRS, FREng, FRSA, FBCS, also known to the internet as TimBL – is sitting in his Oxford home. I can see airy windows and an elaborate Victorian dollhouse in the background. I've never addressed a knight before, so my first question is one of etiquette. "Err, you can call me Tim," he says, cracking a lopsided smile. "The rule is, if you call me 'Sir' you have to buy everyone a round of drinks."

It would be kind of nice to imagine the Father of the Web sitting in a leather swivel chair, in a secret lab underneath Geneva, surrounded by dozens of high-resolution monitors. You reach him by unlocking a series of doors, each wired with explosives, which can only be opened at a precise time. When you arrive, breathless, he turns slowly and says something like,

'Ah yes, the systemic anomaly. I've been expecting you.'

Instead, Tim Berners-Lee turns out to be a sixty-six-year-old human man in a black jacket and dark collared shirt. A shock of grey hair rises from his balding head, 'Doc' Brown style. His eyes are bright and intelligent behind rectangular specs. When he talks, it's in fits and starts, head darting side to side like a bird, arms and hands flapping through space. Ideas chase one another around with an audible *whooshing* noise. The overall impression is a powerful but slightly neurotic hybrid: half Jobs, half Wozniak.

If you're reading this article on a device, it's largely thanks to this man. If you've ever typed an address into a browser, it's definitely because of this man. Most of our modern existence can be traced back to a single day in March 1989, when computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee pitched the idea for the World Wide Web. He sketched his original vision while working at the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (CERN). In 1990, he published the world's first website. Shortly after, he gave the whole thing away for free.

In a list of eighty cultural moments that shaped the world, chosen by a panel of twenty-five eminent scientists and academics in 2016, the invention of the Web came in at number one. There was the world Before Web, and the world After Web. Tim Berners-Lee has been knighted by the Queen. *Time* named him one of the most important figures of the twentieth century. He's won the Turing Award and been celebrated at the Olympic Games. His face appears on stamps. And for the last thirty-odd years, he's been quietly working away, brain on high boil, trying to protect his creation from forces that seek to pervert it.

"TO A CERTAIN extent, we could foresee that monopolies would take over the Web," Berners-Lee says. "We were always beset by monopolies, really, even in the beginning. What we didn't see is that disinformation would win."

After Russian hackers interfered with the US election in 2016, and after Facebook admitted to selling the private data of GD updated million users to political research firm Cambridge Analytica, and after the disinformation shitstorm of the previous decade, it became obvious to Berners-Lee, and to pretty much everyone else, that the Web was sick. Something was going wrong. Our "abstract imaginary space of information", as Berners-Lee describes it, was becoming less abstract and more nightmarish by the day. The network that was meant to set us free, to democratise information and smooth out inequality, was being debased, corrupted by private interest, locked away in data silos. More and more of the Web seemed to belong to fewer and fewer people. Instead of some boundless creative tundra, the Web felt more like a meat grinder: people go in, and data comes out.

"After two decades, it became clear that people didn't feel empowered, they didn't feel safe, they didn't feel like they had a home on the Web," Berners-Lee says. "That's always been the snag with the Web, and technology in general: everyone competes. And if you compete and you win, you become a monopoly. That's bad for people and bad for innovation."

"We were always beset by monopolies, really, even in the beginning. What we didn't see is that disinformation would win."

So, from his lab at MIT, Berners-Lee set to work hacking the Web, breaking it down and coming up with a brand new project, called Solid. He also started a tech company, Inrupt, to shepherd the project along.

Berners-Lee describes Solid as a "mid-course correction" for the Web. Like knocking an out-of-control asteroid onto a better trajectory. It's a new platform, built from existing parts, that will (in theory) restore the fundamental principles of the internet. It'll alter not just how you interact with the Web, but more importantly, how the Web interacts with *you*.

BUT TO UNDERSTAND how Solid works, and how it might change your life, we have to go back to the early days of the Web itself.

Tim Berners-Lee grew up in London in the 1960s. His parents were both tech pioneers; in fact, they helped build one of the first commercial computer systems. One of Berners-Lee's earliest memories is talking with his father about how computers would one day mimic the human brain. He studied physics at Oxford where, as a student, he cobbled his own computer together from an old TV, a few odds and ends, and a soldering iron.

In the 1980s, Berners-Lee began working as a consultant at CERN, where he came up with an initial Web-ish prototype, which would allow scientists to share information across emerging systems. He called it, rather charmingly, Enquire Within Upon Everything. It took another ten years to refine the idea and write a memo, *Information Management: A Proposal*, which mapped out the DNA of the World Wide Web. When researchers found the memo, years later, there was a small note from Berners-Lee's supervisor scrawled on top: "Vague but exciting..."

It's probably worth clarifying something at this point: the Web is not the internet. They're two different things. When Berners-Lee proposed the Web in 1989, the internet had already been kicking around for a decade and a half, although most of the planet didn't know it existed. It was invented (largely) by Vint Cerf and Bob Kahn in the 1970s. They came up with the "Internet Protocol" (IP), by which packets of information could be bounced between computers. The internet is basically a network of networks; a way for one computer to talk to another computer. It's the physical thing the Web plugs into.

What Berners-Lee did, which seems obvious to us now but at the time required a Newton-level imaginative leap, was pitch a single information system, accessible to anyone, from anywhere, which could (in theory) house every document ever written. It took things that already existed – the internet, hypertext links, the Domain Name System (DNS) and Transmission Control Protocol (TCP) – and turned them into something new.

The Web was *so* new, in fact, so earth-shatteringly simple, that when the first website appeared in an academic chatroom in 1991, its significance wasn't obvious. "No one paid much attention," Vint Cerf admitted, years later. It was like seeing the first wheel and being asked to imagine the internal combustion engine. Suddenly, humanity had an open-source information system that could be used by anyone in the world. More or less for free.

This bit is important. It's how the Web won. At the time, there were other information systems out there, but Berners-Lee knew if his

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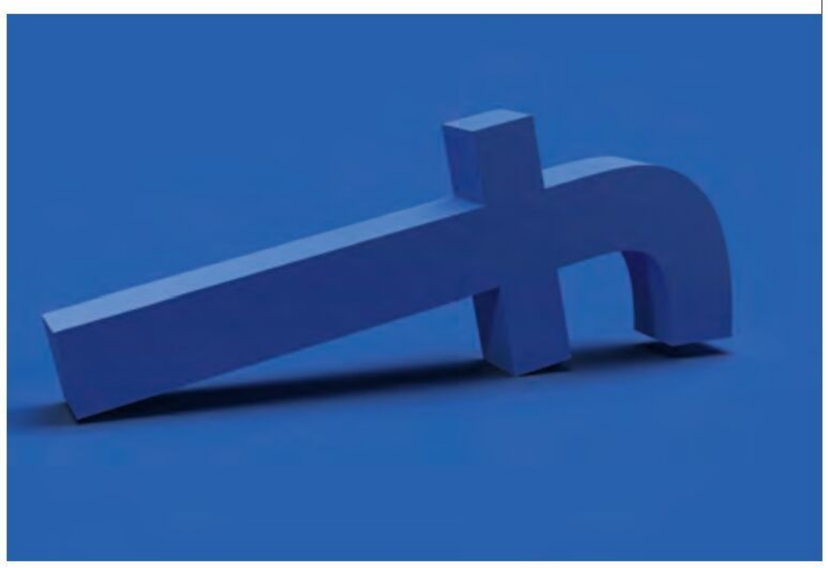
JAMES SHACKELL *is a Melbourne-based freelance writer and regular contributor to Red Bull, Frankie, and Urban List.*

◄ **IN 1990,** Sir Timothy Berners-Lee published the world's first website. Shortly after, he gave the whole thing away for free.

▼ **AFTER FACEBOOK** admitted to selling private data, and after the disinformation shitstorm of the previous decade, it became obvious to Berners-Lee that the Web was sick.



creation was going to become dominant it had to be completely unrestricted. Free to use, free to explore, free to build upon. A giant digital sandbox for the world's collective imagination. So he decided to give it away.

Understandably, computer scientists and academics were the first to jump on-board – in those early days, Berners-Lee mostly imagined the Web as a space to share documents and text – but within a year of the first website launch, developers were already exploring strange new virtual shores. Users were joining all the time. Different browsers launched, email systems sprouted, images popped onto the screen, chat rooms flickered to life, and the blogosphere exploded overnight. By the year 2000, five per cent of the world's population were using Berners-Lee's creation. By 2014, nearly half the planet was 'online'.

"That first decade was very positive," Berners-Lee says. "We were unfettered by technology. We didn't need any countries or rules. We thought we'd be able to solve all the problems of humanity," he gives a tired smile, "which was maybe a little optimistic."

INRUPT'S CEO AND co-founder, John Bruce, first heard about Solid over dinner with Berners-Lee. John is Tim's right-hand man. They often appear on stage together at conferences: Bruce the savvy, level-headed businessman, Berners-Lee the fidgety, quick-talking genius. "When he first explained Solid to me, I couldn't glob on initially," Bruce admits, "I struggled to see how the tech would work, and it wasn't because he was stupid. *One* of us was definitely stupid.

"Tim started describing to me his initial vision for the Web, and compared to what we've got, it's vastly different. Tim's Web is the kind of Web I'd love to live in. I don't think I misspeak when I say no-one understands the Web like he does. Like, literally nobody."

Berners-Lee's pitch was simple in theory and thorny as all hell in practice. The basic idea of Solid was to separate the Web's apps from its data. To give information and power back to users. People like you and me. To smash the stranglehold of Big Tech and make the Web more open, more private, more democratic, more useful and more secure. All at the same time.

"Once I understood the mission, the whole thing became immediately exciting," Bruce says. "Could we, in fact, with miniscule resources, pivot the Web? Could we knock it back onto its true course?"

Solid works like this: it's a platform you can access from your browser, like any other app. Only it's not an app. It's a way for you to store your private data in something called a 'Pod'. Your Solid Pod becomes your home on the Web, your safe space, your lockbox, the one spot where all the fractured digital bits of you fuse together. And, most importantly, you own the key.

"The problem at the moment is, I don't exist holistically anywhere on the Web," Bruce says. "There's a fraction of me in all of my apps, but no assembly. What Solid does is recompose all of those factoids into one holistic Me. And now I can enjoy a real relationship with the Web on my terms. Not just little bits of me, but the *whole* me."

The beauty of Solid doesn't become apparent until you "get down into the weeds", to borrow Bruce's phrase. Imagine having total and absolute control over your own data. Imagine government departments who could collaborate based on shared, up-to-date citizen information. Imagine better public policy based on deep insights. Imagine big apps having to ask your permission, or being able to share the information you wanted, when you wanted. Imagine developers exploring a new open-source world, where every app talks to every other app. Imagine never having to remember another password – your Pod is your gateway to everything. Want to start a business in Europe? No problem. All your application data is already on your Pod, safe and sound. Give your bank access to your Pod's financial info and they can provide an instant guarantee, without revealing how much money you've got.

Solid takes all the existing tension on the Web – between users, companies, developers and governments – and unwinds it, all in one go. Instead of a centralised Web, belonging to a rich few, we could have a *de*-centralised Web in the hands of the many. You can imagine it as an ecosystem, although Berners-Lee prefers a different metaphor.

"I think of the Web as a town," he says, "and in that town I have a house, and in that house I have a room. There are buildings where I go to meet other people, shared public spaces, but also private spaces for myself. Like a town, it's got lots of stuff happening, and I can choose what to participate in."

BERNERS-LEE AND BRUCE realised early that if Solid was ever going to work, it needed to mirror the launch of the Web itself. That means it needed to be easy, free and open-source, and it needed to provide value to *everyone*. Big business included.

"I think you might be shocked at some of the businesses we're talking to," Bruce says. "Having the CEO of a huge tech company say, 'I want all of our four billion users on this', or when the Prime Minister of Flanders in Belgium says, 'Every Flanders baby will get a Solid Pod. This is how our social services are going to run', you know something big is happening. We needed to get to a place where tech companies realised that change was inevitable."

TOP: TAYLOR VIVK; UNSPLASH, ROMAN MARTYNIUK; UNSPLASH

In some ways, we're already at that tipping point: the imaginary wave crest where companies realise there's more money to be made from privacy than blatantly selling user data. People are, quite frankly, pissed off with the Web. They're finally ready for something better.

Last year Apple launched App Tracking Transparency, which allowed iPhone users to block apps from harvesting their data. It crippled one of the pillars of digital advertising and coincidentally pissed off Facebook big-time. "What we've been all about is putting the power with the user," said Apple CEO Tim Cook. "We're not making the decision, we're just simply prompting them to be asked if they want to be tracked across apps or not. And, of course, many of them are deciding no."

Google and other tech companies are doing similar things, with varying degrees of sincerity. Even Facebook, which is essentially a data-mining organisation with a news feed stuck on, has launched a new 'Privacy Centre' for users, in an attempt to appear more transparent – which is a bit like a fast food chain inserting a dew-fresh lettuce leaf into a double bacon cheeseburger.

The point of Solid, Bruce says, is that it can actually flip the entire users-versus-Big Tech debate and create simultaneous value for *everyone*. The Web, in its ideal state, should be a marketplace, not a battleground. With Solid, ordinary people will have total control over how much data they give away, and companies will have a better understanding of you, and your preferences, than ever before. In theory, everybody wins.

"App developers and organisations, they're bound by the same problems we've got," Bruce says. "They'd *love* to know more about me, because then they'd be able to deliver a better product or service. But they're constrained. Not just in what they can entice me to give up, but by squirrelly APIs and all these regulatory hurdles. At the same time, they have to become experts in data law and privacy, even if their core competency is making shoes!

"I think the Web shows symptoms of an illness, and people are trying to attend to the symptoms. What Solid is doing is curing the disease. That's how we talk about it. The Web is organic and it continues to grow. It just so happens that it's sick."

IT'S IN THE nature of networks to become exponentially more useful, and more powerful, as more users join. Isolated, the Web is meaningless; connected, it has almost limitless utility. That's how it went with Web 1.0, back in 1991, and it's how Solid is currently tracking. The project is still in its infancy. Right now, Berners-Lee and his team are building scalable enterprise functionality, to make Solid more useful for big tech companies, and even governments. "We're not quite ready for end users to rush towards us," Bruce admits, "because there's not a whole lot to provision them with – yet."

Still, if you want an example of a Solid world, look to the little Dutch-speaking region of Flanders in Belgium.

ARTHUR OSIPYAN; UNSPLASH

Inrupt are working closely with the Flemish government to build a service called 'My Citizen Profile', where every Flanders citizen will be given their own Solid Pod from birth. Free of charge. Through Solid, the people of Flanders will be able to quickly update every single government department in one place: a change of address, the birth of a child, sharing their work history with potential employers, or registering a new company. Public policy will be informed by what's actually happening on the ground. Health care will become more efficient, infrastructure projects will go where they're needed, and education initiatives can have a bigger impact.

"People will get addicted to that value, addicted to the control, addicted to the way all their apps link together," Berners-Lee says, growing excited. "We'll get to the point where, if you're going to start a company, it makes more financial sense to start it in Flanders. Bit by bit the platform will spread."

Bruce and Berners-Lee both talk about Solid as the inevitable next phase of the Web's evolution. Like losing your appendix. "I'm utterly convinced we're going to make it happen," Bruce says. And when you hear him, it sounds true. The biggest hurdle the pair face right now is one of vocabulary.

"In the short term, Solid is difficult to explain. A bit like the original Web," Berners-Lee says. "You can imagine, before the Web was invented, explaining a 'click' to somebody. Before the Web, that just meant a mouse click, it didn't mean anything else. When you explained to people that 'clicking' one piece of hypertext could take them literally anywhere, it sort of blew their minds. They couldn't grasp it. That's what a paradigm shift is. It's when the situation afterwards needs words to describe it that don't exist yet."

That's how Berners-Lee views Solid, as an epoch-defining collective leap. One that we have to take together. A better Web is out there, just over the horizon line, but we can't quite wrap our heads around it, and that lack of imagination is holding everyone back.

"If I could bottle what I feel when I go around the world and talk to very smart people, and hear what they're going to do with this technology, honestly it's so energising," Bruce says. "When I go home to my kids, they actually ask me about my work, because for the first time in my career, they're interested in what it *means*. I think they can see it. So we can't fail. We're not going to fail."

EVERY YEAR, ON the anniversary of his creation, Tim Berners-Lee writes an open letter to the Web. Some of them read like manifestos, others like love letters. In 2019, he wrote this:

"It's understandable that many people feel afraid and unsure if the Web is really a force for good. But given how much the Web has changed in the past thirty years, it would be defeatist and unimaginative to assume that the Web as we know it can't be changed for the better. If we give up on building a better Web now, the Web will not have failed us. We will have failed the Web."

DANCE GAVIN DANCE

JACKPOT Juicer

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The Rebirth *of* Jack White

By
Tyler Jenke

When Jack White first rang in the new year back in 2020, he probably wouldn't have assumed that just over two years later he'd be releasing two solo albums in quick succession. After all, 2019 had brought with it *Help Us Stranger,* the first new album from The Raconteurs (or The Saboteurs, as they're known in Australia), and with international touring having filled most of that year, it likely would have continued that way for some time. Of course, as we know all too well, time makes fools of us all.

AS THE WORLD locked down amidst the global COVID pandemic and we were forced to adapt to new ways of living, many artists found ways to embrace the boundaries. For Jack White it meant becoming creative in all new ways.

"The whole world of musicians was told, 'You're not going to be playing shows', so that right there stopped a lot of trains," White explains from his home via Zoom, fittingly dressed in a white-striped shirt. "That means if you're not playing shows, then maybe you're not going to release an album, and then if you're not releasing the album, that means you're not writing songs.

"So a lot of people that I know were in crisis mode: 'How am I going to pay the bills and what am I going to do?'" he recalls. "So I changed my own personal relation to it in a creative way. I just used it to be more creative, and I was lucky to be in the position where I could make more creativity happen. It was such a rebirth for me."

However, while some artists found themselves in a position in which their musical creativity was unbridled, White chose a different outlet at first. Rather than writing and recording music that wouldn't see the light of day or make it to the live stage, he instead dove back into his love of making furniture.

"I didn't write music for the first eight or nine months of 2020," he admits. "I thought, 'If I do this, I'm in danger of putting this in a can and waiting for a year and a half until I can perform it'. So I thought, 'I don't want to do that – that's a little bit strange'. By the time I perform on stage, I might be already on to something else.

R"So that didn't seem very appealing for a while. But no problem, because immediately I thought, 'Oh, I have some time to work on these furniture pieces I've been putting off for the last couple of years'."

Famously, White's teen years saw him begin an apprenticeship as an upholsterer, launch his own Third Man Upholstery business, and by 2000, form a band, The Upholsterers, with Brian Muldoon. The group was short-lived, and its second single became rather infamous between fans of White's, with the seven-inch record reportedly hidden in pieces of furniture the pair worked on.

He wasn't *solely* focused on furniture-making activities during lock down. Though 2020 had initially been set to include wider touring for The Raconteurs, some of this unintended downtime gave White the ability to finally launch the first international Third Man Records location.

White's record label was founded in 2001, but it wasn't until 2009 that its first physical location was opened in Nashville, Tennessee. In 2015, another location was opened in White's hometown of Detroit, Michigan. However, plans for an international location in London were quickly put in jeopardy due to the difficulties of the pandemic.

> "I was lucky to be in the position where I could make more creativity happen. It was such it was a rebirth for me."

"Everyone was sort of saying, 'Yeah, maybe we just shouldn't do it. There's a pandemic. It's closed down. There's tax implications for opening a new store in the country. We've never done it before'," White recalls. "There were a lot of reasons to not do it, but I was just holding on tight: 'Oh man, it's such a cool idea. I want to try this for one minute'."

Ultimately, White hit upon the idea of treating the location as something of a long-term pop-up store, and in September of 2021, Third Man Records London opened its doors. White even performed a solo set to commemorate its opening – his first public performance since the end of 2019.

Since then, the location has become something of a success, providing an outlet for fans of Third Man Records in Europe, and even enlisting London's Islands of Love as the store's first-ever signing.

"Maybe it'll only last a year," White notes. "I don't know, but it's doing really well so far."

SUPPLIED

TYLER JENKE *was named in TMN's 30 Under 30 Awards for journalism.*

AT THE END of 2020, White did indeed find himself beginning to lend his time to creating music again. With some notable physical restrictions in place, he was unable to collaboratively write with any of his previous bandmates, and as such, his output could only fall under the Jack White banner.

"In The White Stripes, I was the songwriter and arranger, that was it," he recalls. "Meg [White] played drums, I did everything else. So those are Jack White songs. In The Raconteurs, me and Brendan [Benson] write together. So these are Jack and Brendan songs. And in The Dead Weather, all four of us write. Of course, solo is just like The White Stripes where I write everything myself.

"So you have that as a start and then you use the scenario," he explains. "I have to look at this for what it is at this time. *This* scenario was, 'No rush here [laughs]. It's not like there's going to be shows in two months, or you have to have an album out for Christmas or some business thing. So there's no rush'."

White was never going to fall prey to the creative restrictions of COVID-19. In fact, he found himself thriving without the usual creative freedom of "spoiled excess".

ULTIMATELY, THE PANDEMIC gave way to two new albums – White's first solo records since *Boarding House Reach* in 2018. The first of these records, dubbed *Fear of The Dawn*, was released in April, and features a sound that lends itself more closely to what die-hard fans of White might expect.

"If someone was asking me as a guitar player, 'What would you think is the most interesting *guitar* work you've done', I would hand them this *Fear of The Dawn* album," White admits. "I do think it's the most – in my own little bubble, from my own garage out back – most interesting stuff I've put down.

"[It has] the most different kinds of techniques that I've ever used before, different types of editing and recording on computer; digitally *and* on tape, and splicing them together. And playing all the instruments myself on a recording, or writing songs on bass and then writing a guitar solo right after that. I would have never done that before, really. So as a guitar player, it really pushed me way farther than I ever pushed myself before."

Opening with the incendiary "Taking Me Back", White's classic blues influences can be found throughout the record, though it's songs such as "Into the Twilight", "Morning, Noon and Night", and "Eosophobia" that see him pushing things to their limit as he effortlessly transcends genres and sounds.

"That 'Eosophobia' track, someone could say, 'This kind of sounds like something that The Upsetters would do. Or maybe it's The Police – late Seventies Police would do a track like this'," he begins. "I could say, 'Yeah, well, you know what? I love The Police and that style of music, I could spend my whole life playing just that style of music'. But other things come out of me at times, and I'm lucky enough to be an antenna for a couple of other things that pop in here and there.

"But songs like 'Hi-De-Ho', 'Eosophobia', and 'Into the Twilight', I don't even *know* how many genres are in those three songs," he continues. "You're talking Forties swing, Nineties hip-hop, sampling from William Burroughs to Manhattan Transfer, and going into this Frank Zappa meets Captain Beefheart sound. I think that might be a turnoff to a lot of people because it's not the same thing every time. But I always tell people, my favourite Beatles record is *The White Album*, and I really like when one song ends and the next one is a complete left turn."

> "I found myself saying lately that *Fear of The Dawn* is like a Saturday night record, and Entering Heaven Alive is a Sunday morning record."

One of the more interesting and noteworthy songs on the record is the aforementioned "Hi-De-Ho", which sees White teaming up with hip-hop icon Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest for guest vocals. Though not the first time White had worked with Q-Tip (the pair had previously performed live, while White appeared on A Tribe Called Quest's final album in 2016), it marked the first time he had included a 'featured artist' on one of his tracks.

Initially beginning their collaboration by sending material back and forth to each other, it was the music for "Hi-De-Ho" that appealed to the hip-hop legend's sensibilities, though the final track remained incomplete for some time. Eventually, White found himself changing the ending to the track, and the pair finalised what would become one of the most unique tracks on the record thanks to its blending of genres.

IT WAS NEVER White's intention to create two records. As his prolific creative process continued, White found himself unconsciously penning a pair of separate, yet connected albums, though he never had a desire to release them as one expansive package.

"I kind of got the feeling, 'People just don't take well to double albums'," he explains. "They just don't. So my first kind of thought was, 'I guess I could just make the first record and then put the rest of it out down the road a year later or two years later'. But this is the same thing that I didn't like about the pandemic starting; why bother writing songs right now? They're not going to come out for a year and a half. And by that time, I'll already be on to something different.

"So I thought, 'If I don't put this out now, I bet it's just going to sit there and become a lost record, or a lot of B-sides will get plucked from it'."

The two records, despite being recorded at the same time, found themselves divided into two categories. While the "very heavy ones" found a home on *Fear of The Dawn*, the "very light and gentle" ones became featured on *Entering Heaven Alive*, which arrives in July.

"I found myself saying lately that *Fear of The Dawn* is like a Saturday night record, and *Entering Heaven Alive* is a Sunday morning record," White explains. "It's interesting to me that they were both written at the same time and these songs, they *choose* where they want to be, you don't even have to tell them. I mean, these heavy songs kind of gravitated and were magnetically attracted to one another, and these gentle ones were... They form their own little division.

"I always say the sequence of albums pick themselves," he continues. "'Taking Me Back', the big, heavy 'Taking Me Back', it can only go first on the album. And then, of course, 'Taking Me Back (Gently)'. What else would you do? It's a great bookend to these two records and shows that they have a unification in some ways, but in other ways, they're their own living beasts."

While *Fear of The Dawn* begins with the monstrous celebration of rock that is "Taking Me Back", *Entering Heaven Alive*, with its more luscious production and traditional instrumentation, ends with an alternate version, fittingly titled "Taking Me Back (Gently)". Even *more* fitting is the fact that this track is the only one on the album recorded using traditional equipment, ultimately relishing in its vintage sound.

"It's nice to have 'Taking Me Back' as two different versions of the same song, because it really shows a listener that it doesn't really matter what style you play a song," he explains. "Maybe we're too obsessed with the *style* of a song rather than the actual song that's underneath it all, the foundation of it, the root of the song that's in there.

"['Taking Me Back (Gently)' was recorded on] a 1930s RCA mic [preamp] unit that I got out of an old radio station," he adds. "To put an RCA ribbon mic through an RCA mic preamp from the Thirties right on to a fiddle or an acoustic guitar, it just came so alive. Whereas the heavy version, I played all the instruments and we recorded *completely* on Pro Tools. It's almost like it's recorded in two different time periods of the last 100 years or something."

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Planet Before Profit?

As Australia reels from catastrophic floods, fires and drought, the Australian government still leads the world in climate inertia. And in the corporate sector – which is responsible for some seventy per cent of emissions globally – a growing number of organisations are stepping into the climate leadership vacuum. But can Australia's corporate activists really help fix the climate?

BY OLIVER PELLING

A young boy in a yellow T-shirt walks alongside his mother, gripping his placard tightly with both hands and hoisting it skyward. His mother's phone number is scribbled on his arm in case he gets lost in the crowd. Scrawled on the placard, in his own messy, multicoloured handwriting, is a simple request:

'STOP DESTROY THE EARTH'.

It's a Friday afternoon in March, and the boy should probably be in school. No more than six or seven years old, he's one of thousands of protestors making their way along Melbourne's Spring St. This climate strike has been organised collaboratively by School Strike 4 Climate and Fridays for Future – two student-led activist organisations inspired by Greta Thunberg's now-iconic 2018 action outside the Swedish parliament.

▲ **PATAGONIA STAFF** show their support during Australia's climate marches.

'THIS ISN'T WHAT WE MEANT BY HOT GIRL SUMMER', reads another placard, this one brandished by a teenage girl. In spite of what's at stake – the looming and avoidable collapse of the ecological systems that support life on planet earth, in case you missed it – the mood is buoyant and inclusive, as it has been since 2018, when these school students first flooded Australian streets in the name of climate action.

Collaboration and community are central themes to this particular brand of civil disobedience. The airwaves are dominated by chants of *'SHOW ME WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE / THIS IS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE'*. Toddlers sit on shoulders and grandparents march alongside teenagers alongside young families alongside climate-concerned professionals.

'WHY HAVE AN EDUCATION IF WE HAVE NO FUTURE', reads a banner on the steps of Parliament House.

"There are so many people making themselves heard," seventeen-year-old School Strike 4 Climate activist Emma Slade tells me over the phone a couple of weeks after the march. "It's so important to be out there showing people that this is what they need to be thinking about. As young people, we can't vote. We don't really have a say in a lot of things. So to make it clear not just to government, but to everyone, that this is what we care about and this is what we want - it's really important."

The demands of Emma and her fellow protestors are reasonable enough: they want the government to start taking the climate crisis seriously. That means no more coal or gas projects, no more fossil fuel subsidies, and more investment in renewable energy and technology.

The youth are pissed off and they have every right to be. Australia is currently ranked twelfth in the world for emissions per capita (which is higher than both the US and China). According to the Climate Change Performance Index, Australia is also ranked fifty-ninth (out of sixty-four countries) globally on climate action. This is despite commitments made by Australia as part of the Paris Agreement in 2015 to reduce emissions, and despite Australia's potential for renewable power generation being 500 times greater than current energy generation capacity.

Across Australia, climate activism is taking other forms too, as a distressed general public look for increasingly radical ways to sound the alarm. Some have chained themselves to train tracks and glued themselves to roads, while others have barricaded mining conferences. The Wangan and Jagalingou people, the Traditional Owners of Queensland's Galilee Basin, have been holding ceremony in defiance of the proposed Adani Carmichael coal mine for over 250 days straight.

In spite of these actions, and in spite of devastating floods, bushfires and droughts in their own backyard, Scott Morrison and co. have proven themselves to be recklessly ineffective on climate. The government's current plan, announced in October 2021, is for Australia to reach net zero by 2050, which most analysts agree is 'too little too late' for the country to meet its fair share of keeping global temperatures below 2°C (let alone 1.5°C). Something has to give, and the youth know it.

IN 2017, while he was treasurer of Australia, Scott Morrison waltzed into the House of Representatives and brandished a lump of coal, proudly passing it around the room. "Don't be afraid," he announced. "Don't be scared [...] It is coal that has ensured that for one-hundred years, Australia has enjoyed an energy-competitive advantage that has delivered prosperity to Australian businesses, and has ensured that Australian industry has been able to remain competitive in a global market."

Morrison isn't technically wrong. The trouble is, we now know the full extent of the price we have paid for all those years of "energy-competitive advantage." Australia's national identity – and wealth – is bound tightly to coal. Australia is still the world's second-largest exporter of coal and a major exporter of natural gas. And despite the impacts of climate change playing out in real-time on home soil, fossil fuel companies in Australia still received $10.3 billion in government subsidies in the 2020-21 financial year, according to The Australia Institute. That's $19,686 per minute. And yes, the taxpayer is footing most of that bill, rendering anyone who pays taxes in Australia inadvertently complicit.

At the same time, fossil fuel companies are estimated to have donated some $1.3m to the ALP, Liberal and National Parties in the 2020 financial year. And that's not accounting for 35 per cent of donations from unknown sources – the true figures could be much higher. This information, which is publicly available, illustrates just how tangled up the Australian political system remains in fossil fuels, and the imperative for climate-concerned Australians to look for climate leadership and leverage elsewhere.

▲ Photograph by Jarrah Lynch

The corporate sector is one such elsewhere.

With domestic business and industry responsible for roughly seventy per cent of electricity use in Australia, and corporates responsible for up to seventy per cent of emissions globally, Australian businesses – whether they know it or not – are a weapon in the fight against climate change. "It's just a straight-out mathematical question," says David Ritter, CEO of Greenpeace Australia Pacific. "If you can get significant numbers of those businesses to make a rapid transition from fossil fuels to renewables, then you take a big chunk out of your emissions."

Ritter joined Greenpeace Asia Pacific as CEO in 2012 after spending five years working in the London office. Originally from Perth, the opportunity to come home and help set Australia on a greener path was too good for him to pass up. Since then, he's worked tirelessly alongside his team to take the climate fight to fossil fuel companies and beyond.

Greenpeace's REenergise campaign agitates for "big-electricity using companies" to make public commitments to switch to one-hundred per cent renewable energy by 2025. As of last year, REenergise has succeeded in shifting fifteen major Australian companies (including Lion Beverages, Telstra, Woolworths and Coles) to committing to one-hundred per cent renewables – abating 6.2 million tonnes of carbon in the process.

"We know that federal climate politics is the stinking hot mess that it is," Ritter tells me over the phone. "So, if major businesses are prepared to make rapid transition commitments, then it becomes a way of, to some extent, bypassing the deadlock in Canberra. But all of that only works if the commitments are real."

Ritter gives the example of Aldi. Through REenergise, Greenpeace found that that 83 per cent of Aldi's emissions came from electricity use, and that switching to renewables would be the biggest positive impact they could make for climate in the short-term. "So they did," says Ritter. "That's the kind of real and decisive action we'd like to see from major corporations who are not themselves the fossil-fuel producing corporations, but *are* major electricity users."

But switching to one-hundred per cent renewables is just one part of the puzzle. For real emissions reduction, an organisation needs to look at and reduce *all* of its emissions, which are broken down into three 'Scopes'. Scope 1 emissions are direct emissions from business activities, Scope 2 emissions are from the electricity a business uses, and Scope 3 emissions (often the largest chunk of corporate emissions) cover all of a business's supply chain and outsourced services.

And this is where the work for corporates really begins. Ideally, an organisation must first commit to reaching net zero emissions. They can then work closely with the Science Based Targets Initiative (SBTi) – which will provide guidance and support in setting a date – and reducing emissions in step with it, across all scopes. They will then be expected to formally announce their targets to employees, customers and stakeholders and annually track and report on their progress against them.

No empty promises, basically.

Trouble is, many Australian organisations are making bold claims about net zero targets without figuring out how to get there. According to a recent Greenpeace report into greenwashing (defined as when an organisation makes a claim around sustainability initiatives that is either misleading or completely untrue), of the 80 ASX200 companies that have set net zero targets, only sixteen have actually committed to reducing their emissions. The rest have "no firm plans" to end their use of fossil fuels or are relying on "dubious" carbon offsets (which, it should be noted, are absolutely no substitute for real emissions reduction).

"What that means is that roughly two thirds of the companies with net zero emissions

targets can't actually claim to be taking meaningful climate action," says Ritter. "What they're doing is instead trying to pull the wool over the eyes of stakeholders and customers with these dodgy net zero emissions claims."

Ritter explains that he's seeing corporate leaders in Australia splitting off into two camps: those who are dead serious about reducing their emissions, and those who are asking what needs to change in order for things to stay exactly the same. "It's clear that we need more of those people in the second camp to get into the first camp, and unlock all the benefits that go with that," he says.

STEPHANIE CURLEY'S favourite flavour of ice cream is Cold Brew Coffee Fudge Choc Chip. This is important, because in her day job as Impact and Activism Manager at Ben & Jerry's Australia and New Zealand, she has exclusive (and presumably unfettered) access to a big wide world of ice cream flavours.

If you think it's a little odd for an ice cream company to have an Impact and Activism Manager, you wouldn't be alone. Curley grew up with a strong sense of social justice, and knew she wanted her work to have a positive impact. She went into law after graduating from university, thinking that's where she'd be able to make the biggest difference. She then moved into the world of NGOs, before eventually arriving in the private sector (via a stint at Billabong). Curley now works for the Australian wing of an American ice cream company where she believes she's able to have a bigger positive impact than she would in law and NGOs.

Usually based in Noosa (she's an avid surfer), Curley is talking to me via Zoom while holidaying back home in New Zealand. She just returned from a work trip to northern Tasmania, where she joined up with one of Ben & Jerry's NGO partners, Surfrider Foundation Australia, to visit communities that will be impacted by proposed gas and oil rigs off the coast.

"Some of these communities had no idea it was going on," says Curley. "Surfrider Foundation knew that they needed to be on the ground to garner the community support and have those conversations. What's different about working at Ben & Jerry's is that I could say to [Surfrider Foundation], 'Cool, we'll pay for it. Let's scoop ice cream and get people along and start those conversations'."

Ben & Jerry's is part of a burgeoning movement of 'conscious' corporates, who view their position, platforms and resources as essential tools to make the world a better place. For Ben & Jerry's, which has been helping to pioneer the idea of socially-conscious business globally since the 1980s (even after its controversial acquisition by Unilever in 2000), this work is captured in its entirety in the company's annual impact report.

On the energy and emissions front, Ben & Jerry's has committed to science-based targets (via the SBTi) of one-hundred per cent renewables by 2025, a 40 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas intensity by 2025, and an eighty per cent reduction in greenhouse gas intensity by 2050. "We have teams in the US that stringently work on making sure we're not just beating the science-based targets, but that we're doing more," says Curley.

There's one obvious counter to all of this: wouldn't it be more effective to remove the ice cream from the equation altogether? After all, cows and other livestock produce around 14 per cent of human-induced emissions, and Ben & Jerry's readily admits that dairy ingredients account for more than fifty per cent of their greenhouse gas emissions. Then there's the fact that parent company Unilever's own climate targets were rated as having 'very low integrity' by the Corporate Climate Responsibility Monitor in February 2022 (which doesn't factor into Ben & Jerry's targets, but remains important context).

▲ *Left to right:* **DAMIEN COLE,** (Surfrider Foundation Australia), **STEPH CURLEY** (Ben & Jerry's), **DREW MCPHERSON** (Surfrider Foundation Australia).

"I think that's the best question you could be asking," says Curley. "By virtue of being a product, we're still creating a negative impact. But if we stopped production tomorrow, the planet's still heading off in a direction that's infinitely scarier than I could ever describe. So why not do everything we can behind the scenes to reduce our carbon impact and be a business as a force for good?"

Curley concedes that for systemic climate action to happen in Australia, more needs to be done at a policy level. And while she acknowledges that corporates can't fix the climate crisis on their own, she does believe that they can harness their resources and influence to help move the needle in a meaningful way.

"The people making the decisions about energy, and what type of car we drive, they're all the people in parliament," she says. "And unless we have a change in policy, we're not going to see the changes we need for climate justice. And we know that the [Ben & Jerry's] platform is a really powerful tool for change at a policy level. That's why we don't say, 'Fine, we'll give up'. Why not use our platform to drive a really strategic and structural change?"

As for Curley's soft spot for Cold Brew Coffee Fudge Choc Chip, it's one-hundred per cent certified vegan, made using sunflower seed butter. "Sunflowers are really great at drawing down carbon and nitrogen," she says. "If you use them in conjunction with regenerative agriculture, you can get a lot of carbon in the ground." The company currently has no "affirmative answer" about whether it will move to one-hundred per cent non-dairy in the future.

MINNA BLACKWELL

OLIVER PELLING *is a writer and editor based in Naarm/Melbourne. He was acting editor of the September 2021 issue of Rolling Stone Australia.*

Ben & Jerry's is just one example of an increasing number of organisations that are using their platforms and resources for more than just profit. The company is also a certified B Corp, which is a rigorous business certification designating that a business is meeting high standards of impact in five key areas, from how it treats (and even pays) its staff, to its impact on the environment and local communities. Australia and New Zealand are home to roughly ten per cent of global B Corps (there are 4,897 B Corps around the world and counting), and that number is fast increasing.

But as the Greenpeace greenwashing report illustrates, consumers need to be prepared to approach brands and their bold claims of do-gooding with caution. Even Ben & Jerry's was (unsuccessfully) sued in 2019 for claiming it used 'happy cows' (the company has since stopped using the phrase, and established the 'Caring Dairy' program in 2020). Complexities abound in this space: a green logo is not the same as a 'green' company, a B Corp certification is not the same as net zero or science-based targets, and a pledge to be one-hundred per cent renewable by 2050 is not one-hundred per cent renewable *now*.

An understanding of key terms and a healthy skepticism of any institution making bold claims is wise in any climate; even more so in the context of the climate crisis. You need only look at the Australian government's very own (and very short-lived) 'Australia's making positive energy' ads for a masterclass in what not to do.

For climate activists, one of the key frustrations is that there's really no *need* for all of this greenwash if you're willing to do the work. "You just think, why is this proving so hard?" says Ritter. With the plummeting cost of renewable energy globally and as many as seventy-four per cent of Australians convinced that further action on climate will outweigh the costs (according to the Lowy Institute), the business case for Australian organisations to take real and meaningful action on climate is growing by the day. There's also no shortage of external resources, tools and experts to help organisations make the switch.

Dane O'Shannassy lives on Victoria's surf coast where he works as Patagonia's Country Director Australia & New Zealand. And for O'Shannassy, who acknowledges his privilege as an "employed white person in a country like Australia", there are other ethical and moral responsibilities to consider too.

"A big part of acting on climate also comes back to that privilege," he says. "A lot of people are worried about filling the tank to get to work and putting food on the table for the kids. I have had to regularly remind myself over the years that I have to work *twice* as hard on this, because so many people *can't* worry about climate change. They're worried about where the next meal is coming from. I think there's an imperative for Western countries to lead, to invest and to be generous in helping to bring about change."

Patagonia (also a B Corp) has a long and well-documented history of social and environmental good, which has been led by founder Yvon Chouinard since the company was founded in 1970. The organisation's slogan, 'We're in business to save our home planet', spans grassroots local activism to taking a global leadership position on climate. And for O'Shannassy, who joined Patagonia nearly a decade ago, a large part of what made the company so compelling was how they dealt with the things they didn't do well, or that their customers called them out on.

"It wasn't to bring in the spin doctors, it wasn't to deny," he says. "It was to share the news widely about what we had been doing, admit that we had some work to do, and then take our customers on that journey with us. It revealed to me the power of transparency, and I apply that to how we're tackling climate change as a company now – which is more urgent and more visceral than ever. It's about looking at the gaps and the faults, more than trying to stand on the successes. You end up with something far more resilient."

"It's going to be messy and we're going to go through tricky times, but on the other side, we can create an incredible, thriving civilisation for future generations."

In Melbourne's St Kilda, less than a week after the School Strike 4 Climate, a group of climate-concerned individuals gather at the White House – the home of *Dumbo Feather* magazine and its parent company, Small Giants – for a screening of *Regenerating Australia*. The film is the work of Damon Gameau, the filmmaker behind *2040* and *That Sugar Film*, and takes the form of a fictional news broadcast beamed in from the year 2029.

Just shy of 20 minutes in length, the film looks back on all of the changes that occurred in Australia to avert climate catastrophe. Triggered by a spate of widespread national protests, those changes included restricting political donations, recognising First Nations sovereignty, establishing a youth parliamentary advisory council, powering the entire nation on one-hundred per cent renewables (and the associated jobs boom), the greening of cities and urban spaces and much, much more besides. In its entirety, the film is a hopeful vision for an Australia that Gameau believes is still within reach.

"We've got to tell that story, and get people excited by the better world we can create," Gameau tells me over the phone the following week. "It's going to be messy and we're going to go through tricky times, but on the other side, we can create an incredible, thriving civilisation for future generations. What a legacy. That amidst all the chaos and the nihilism and the species extinction and the misinformation, there were people that actually got together and chose a different path."

This work, and these decisions, aren't reserved for CEOs, either. There's an opportunity for employees to push for change within the organisations and systems they currently work within – no matter their job title or pay grade.

There are an increasing number of tools and resources that provide individuals with the skills they need to push for change from the inside, including the Small Giants Academy's Mastery of Business and Empathy (a kind of alternative to an MBA) and WorkForClimate, an online learning resource for employees looking to take climate action at work. "Sometimes it's as simple as asking the question," says WorkForClimate Director, Lucy Piper. "If an individual is able to make the business case for switching to renewables, for example, their organisation is going to be much more likely to listen. We can help them do that."

Of course, the influence of corporates is just one lever that can be pulled in the fight against climate change; a single piece of a much broader cultural, economic and even spiritual realignment. First Nations systems, voices and solutions will of course be central to figuring out what a truly 'regenerative' Australia looks like. Then there are the more existential questions, about what 'sustainability' really means within a capitalist system, and how gross domestic product is arguably an insufficient, extractive and harmful model for measuring a country's 'growth'. (The fact that the Australian advertising industry spent a record-breaking $8.6bn on encouraging Australians to consume in 2021 alone might need to be addressed, too).

For now though, in the context of our immediate climate threat, focusing on meaningful and real emissions reduction is one thing that experts agree corporates can do today to help leverage more action from policy makers. And an organisation doesn't need to have the size, scale or resources of an Aldi, Patagonia or Ben & Jerry's to make an impact. "Australia has made these massive economic changes before," says David Ritter. "We can make this change again. So how do we achieve decarbonisation within a decade or so in a way that is socially inclusive? That's the job ahead." ®

Reviews

Music

KOFFEE'S REGGAE REVIVAL

The rising Jamaican artist combines classic and new sounds on a great album

By MANKAPRR CONTEH

Koffee

Gifted

COLUMBIA

★★★★☆

KOFFEE HAS only had about a dozen of her songs widely available to stream until now, but the 22-year-old Jamaican artist is already proving she can reinvigorate reggae and dancehall for a pop audience. Her joyous 2018 smash "Toast" earned her spots on two of Barack Obama's coveted playlists, and in 2019 she became the first woman to win the Grammy for Best Reggae Album. Along the way, she's collaborated with rapper Gunna and John Legend, and this year she'll open the Latin American leg of Harry Styles' world tour. Now, she's delivering on the promise of "Toast" with *Gifted,* her excellent debut full-length.

On *Gifted,* Koffee combines traditional reggae with →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Dani Pendergast

KOFFEE

modern flourishes and hip-hop sensibilities, reminding us that rap's roots are richly intertwined with Jamaican music. While a song like "Lonely" could make the purest purist smile, "Defend" breaks out dusty boom-bap production, and "Shine" sets sunny guitars over tittering hi-hats and strong 808s. The album's musical backdrops range from breezy to absorbing, but it's Koffee's performances that are consistently bewitching. She skips between honeyed, heartfelt trills and mind-bogglingly meticulous flows, intricate and acrobatic. Even on the gentle "Lonely," Koffee can't help but break into dexterous bars about her vision, style, and inspirations for a fiery denouement.

"Lonely" is one of a handful of tracks here that could be classified as a love song, something that, so far, has mostly been absent from her catalogue. Koffee usually puts pen to paper to empower and give thanks, but the girl proves herself to be a compelling romantic, too. When she coaxes and compliments her "darling" (her pet name of choice; she doesn't employ any gendered pronouns) on "Lonely," her game is so sweet and soft it almost feels platonic: *"I hope your day's fine – we should spend the day now."* She's bolder on the standout "Run Away," where her flashy flexes amount to pleas for affection: "I just wanna love somebody," she admits.

More than anything, though, *Gifted* is a portrait of a brilliant young artist keenly aware of the miracles that lift her up: a loving mother, a benevolent maker, a tight community, and an impeccable sense of rhythm and rhyme. "Pull Up," a winning meetup with the producer and Afroswing maven JAE5, is one of the album's liveliest celebrations of life and love, elevated by a swirling sax line that winds around Koffee's jubilant closing hook.

You can picture her bright, braced smile when she coos about the simple pleasure of being outside on album opener "x10," and again on "West Indies," when she reminds her managers that even if she's a prodigy, she also wants to party like any other kid. Even when Koffee engages with hardship in her hometown – she name-checks crime, inflation, and police brutality – she does so with brevity and optimism. Koffee is not blind to misfortune. She's looking up in spite of it. ®

RHCP'S HIGH-POWER HOMECOMING

The Chili Peppers reunite with guitarist John Frusciante and create one of their best LPs in years By BRITTANY SPANOS

Red Hot Chili Peppers
Unlimited Love
Warner Bros.
★★★★☆

WHEN WE think of the Red Hot Chili Peppers at their best – making rock that was both breezily Californian and exceedingly funky – guitarist John Frusciante has always been the heartbeat of that sound. Of course, Frusciante's experience with the band has been tempestuous. He's quit twice, most recently parting ways with the group after the tour for their massive double album *Stadium Arcadium* in 2009.

But in 2019, fans of the Chili Peppers were pleasantly shocked by news of Frusciante's return.

Along with Frusciante, they've also reunited with Rick Rubin, who produced every RHCP album from 1992's *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* to 2011's *I'm With You*, their first with Frusciante's replacement, Josh Klinghoffer. The result is vintage RHCP: a jammy, melodic effort that blends the wavy reflections of their 1999 triumph, *Californication*, with the expansive rock of *Stadium Arcadium*.

On lead single "Black Summer," Frusciante vamps and singer Anthony Kiedis serves up a wacky little Irish pirate accent. The band tends to get a lot of flak for Kiedis' lyrics, a sometimes confounding stream of consciousness that would leave James Joyce scratching his head. But for fans, this is often what makes them so delightful, and if you dig beneath the sometimes-muddled surface, there is often a deeper message. Some of the songs here, including "Black Summer," address an underlying climate and Earth anxiety. On "The Great Apes," a kind of booming arena-rock singalong, Kiedis begs, *"I just want the great apes to be free."*

Much of the album feels like a tour of the band's greatest tropes. Take the funky "Aquatic Mouth Dance," which feels like an ode to their funk-rap past, as Flea slaps the bass beneath Kiedis spitting a mix of random references and sometimes earnest yearning. Moving the song forward is a flush of horns, a surprising and gorgeous addition to many of the tracks on the album.

Cuts like the highlight "White Braids & Pillow Chair," "It's Only Natural," "She's a Lover," and "Veronica" are often silly love songs (*'I could spend my nights with you/This pussywillow,'* Kiedis offers), but they're genuinely tender, evoking the oceanic feelings of the more restrained moments of Seventies FM rock on *Californication* and 2002's *By the Way*.

More than anything, this record feels like a homecoming. There's a certain magic that happens with these four musicians, and Frusciante's absence always leaves a piece of the puzzle missing. Thankfully, he always finds his way back. ®

BREAKING

Rema's Smooth Afrorave Sunshine

YOU'VE HEARD of afrobeat, and afrobeats — now it's time to get psyched for afrorave, the enticing genre name that rising Nigerian star Rema has given to the resplendently smooth sound radiating throughout his debut, *Rave & Roses*. Rema has already done big streaming numbers for songs like "Dumebi" and the hypnotic "Soundgasm," which is on the LP. On *Rave & Roses*, his gracious high register splashes over tracks like "Runaway," a lush lover's plea. But there are moodier moments, too, like "Addicted," with its brooding Eighties synths. The mix of sunshine and a little shade makes for a great listen. **JON DOLAN**

FROM TOP: SANDY KIM; COURTESY OF REMA

KING STINGRAY

King Stingray has been on an unprecedented run. Buoyed by a string of successful singles, the band's signature "Yolŋu surf rock" has gripped the nation.

By JAMES DI FABRIZO

KING STINGRAY

King Stingray

(COOKING VINYL)

★★★★★

NOW WITH the release of their long-awaited debut, it takes ten tracks to deliver a profound statement: that King Stingray may be one of the most exciting rock bands to emerge from this country in a generation.

Recorded between the NT, Brisbane and the Byron Bay hinterland, each track is a heady exploration of rhythm, psych and storytelling. Tracks come together like puzzle pieces, showcasing the beauty and community of the place they call home – the incomparable Arnhem Land.

Upon repeated listens, one finds an intoxicating duality in King Stingray's music. On one layer, this is music that pulls you in and asks you to move. On another, it is music ripe with potent messages – layered with wisdom and a perspective severely needed in Australia's homogenous popular music landscape.

Take, for example, the feverish "Milkumana". It would be a standalone highlight judged from the bassline alone. But dig a little deeper and you'll find necessary questions about the state of leadership, politics and the climate crisis.

While King Stingray never *claim* to have all the answers, they have more right than most to ask for them. Their self-titled debut is destined to be an instant classic. A testament to the power of music and the glimpse of togetherness it creates. ®

Jenny Mitchell

Tug of War

(COOKING VINYL)

★★★★☆

NEW ZEALAND singer-songwriter Jenny Mitchell had just finished university as the global pandemic crept across our borders. With her overseas touring ambitions suddenly kaput, all was not lost. Instead, Mitchell made an album. *Tug of War* is personal. It's no wonder that one of her biggest supporters is Australia's Fanny Lumsden. These two have a lot in common: honest lyrics; melodic hooks; and a connection to the land. *Tug of War* isn't Mitchell's first rodeo. But it is her best work, worthy of every award it will inevitably collect. You can't help but feel that you are inside the room in which Jenny Mitchell wrote *Tug of War*. The album's opener, "If You Were A Bird", is a love song that swoops on you. Its closer, a love song of a different nature, is an ode to her grandfather, Bruce, with her Aunty also lending a spine tingling verse in te reo Māori on "The Bush & The Birds". Everything nestled between these two songs will lead you to a Jenny Mitchell show as she finally gets the overseas tour she's been longing for, and now so are we. ® JAKE CHALLENOR

Eliza & The Delusionals

Now and Then

(COOKING VINYL)

★★★★½

FOR ELIZA & THE DELUSIONALS, these past few years were supposed to look a lot different. Forced to abandon their planned move to the US, the group instead found themselves working on *Now and Then* between Australia and Los Angeles. The result was a record which sees the group at their purest; embracing nostalgia while breaking new ground, and making music which sets them apart from all others. Defying one genre in favour of countless sounds that combine to create a unified project, *Now and Then* is the sound of a band not just taking the next step in their career, but busting down every barrier that may have stood in their way as they make themselves known. The record might have served as a form of escape for the band during some trying times, but they've created an album you can't help but fall into. Luscious and vital, it could be one of the year's best. ®

TYLER JENKE

VANCE JOY'S third studio album brings a refreshing twist on the singer's signature sound. Kicking off with the beautifully bright intimate indie-rock tune "Don't Fade", the single explores themes of all-consuming love. There's something for everyone among this thematically diverse record. Fans of James Keogh's most famous hits will thoroughly enjoy tracks like his future classic "Missing Piece". With its intro artfully tinged with familiar elements of 2014's "Fire and the Flood" – the single which famously aided in catapulting the singer to stardom following his 2013 mega-hit "Riptide". Tied together by his uniquely serene voice, Joy's latest effort proves he's still one of music's most captivating vocalists, with his latest sound refreshing enough to lure both new listeners and appease longtime fans of the Aussie export. ® JESSICA LYNCH

Vance Joy

In Our Own Sweet Time

(MUSHROOM)

★★★★☆

KING STINGRAY: LUKE HENERY, JENNY MITCHELL: SUPPLIED

Quick Hits

Seven new albums you need to know about now

Dear Seattle

Someday

(Domestic La La)

Dear Seattle is born again. Frontman Brae Fisher lets it all go on new album *Someday,* in which he wrestles with life's many mental fuckeries – *'Lately I've been trying to pull my heart out' / Lately I've been trying to shut the world out',* he bleeds on the record's title track. *Someday* is littered with lyrical tension and anthemic stems that don't disappoint. **JAKE CHALLENOR**

★★★½☆

Spacey Jane

Here Comes Everybody

(AWAL)

With tracks "Lunchtime" and "Haircut", you might think *Here Comes Everybody* is a children's record where basic concepts are turned into catchy tunes. This Spacey Jane record, however, is anything but juvenile. It was written as the band searched for hope amid COVID and climate catastrophes. It's a relaxed and resilient ride through the minutiae of everyday life, and maybe that's exactly what we need. **VIVIENNE KELLY**

★★★½☆

Adam Spark

Snow VS Mountain

(EMI)

Adam Spark flew high with Birds of Tokyo, the radio-friendly alternative rock outfit from the west coast, which enjoyed a string of hits, number ones and ARIA Awards through the noughts. For his next trick, Spark brings it all back to earth with *Snow VS Mountain,* a meditative, cinematic collection framed around piano and strings. *Snow VS Mountain* owes more to Jon Hopkins' fine hour that is the *Monsters* soundtrack than any Birds number, as Spark locates the deep chill note with British arranger Audrey Riley and post-rock muso Otto Wicks Green. **LARS BRANDLE**

★★★½☆

DUNE RATS

Real Rare Whale

(BMG)

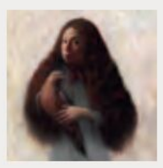
Arriving just in time for the Aussie live music scene's grand return, the trio's latest tunes serve as the perfect positive antidote to pandemic-induced negativity. In what feels like their fastest, funnest and punniest album yet, the slew of party-starting bangers, including single "What A Memorable Night", are clear dancefloor-fillers. **JESSICA LYNCH**

★★★★☆

TE KAAHU

Te Kaahu O Rangi

(Theia Music)



The debut album from Em-Haley Walker is not the sound of the Kiwi pop princess we have come to adore through her Theia project. It's a message of love and peace, sung entirely in her mother tongue, te reo Māori. A tribute to her tūpuna wāhine (female ancestors) and her haukāinga (home) in the Waikato, the record's nine waiata (songs) drape over you like a feathered cloak, clear proof of the transcendent power of music. **POPPY REID**

★★★★☆

Alex the Astronaut

How to Grow A Sunflower Underwater

(WMA)

Sophomore syndrome hasn't found Alex the Astronaut. From the creator of *Absolutely Nothing comes How to Grow A Sunflower Underwater* — a remarkably refreshing and uplifting perspective on "Growing Up", getting a "Haircut" and being "Sick". Only through the lens of an artistic — and recently diagnosed on the autism spectrum — songwriting maven, can we begin to see and experience the world in neoteric ways. **JAKE CHALLENOR**

★★★★½

Thornhill

Heroine

(UNFD)

The Melbournites are back with an artful anthology of stories, all set to a nostalgic cinema-inspired score that's sure to be a treat for any TV and film buff. Atmospheric single "Arkangel" was inspired by the iconic series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* with other tracks influenced by classic Hollywood titles like *Singing In The Rain, American Beauty* and *Romeo & Juliet.* **JESSICA LYNCH**

★★★½☆

DUNE RATS: TOM HEALY, JENNY MITCHELL: SUPPLIED

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor RATINGS ARE SUPERVISED BY THE EDITORS OF ROLLING STONE.

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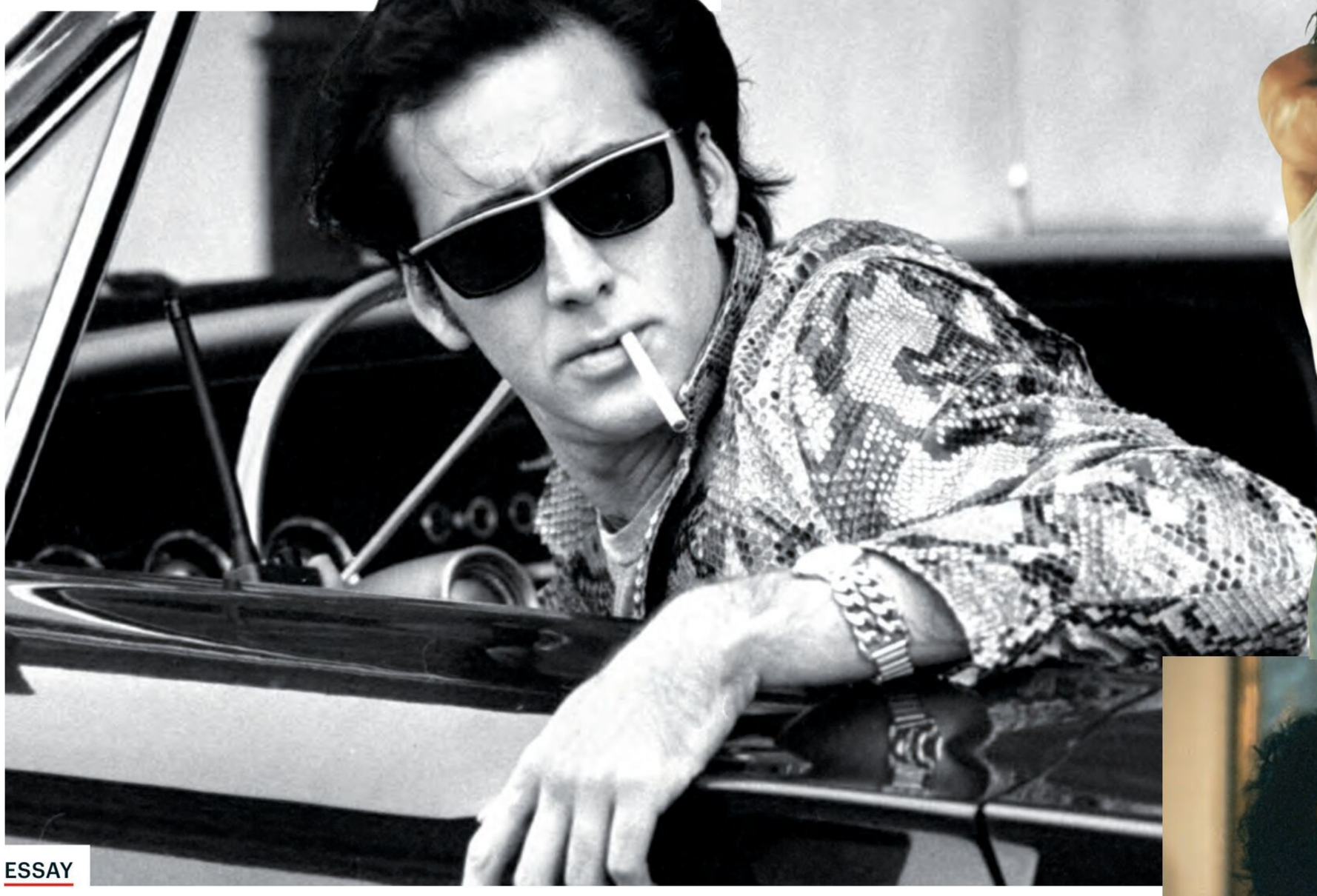


ESSAY

Nicolas Cage: Unhinged Oddball, National Treasure

A tribute to *The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent* star as he turns a meta comedy into a full-circle victory lap

By DAVID FEAR

IT TAKES a very special actor to turn the alphabet into an aria of weirdness. But there's Nicolas Cage, young and handsome in a 1980s Italian power suit, losing his cool after being told a contract's been misfiled. His response is screaming the alphabet: *A! B! C! D!!!* As he shrieks his way through, yes, all twenty-six letters, the volume increases and the movements ramp up to an interpretive dance, or maybe an Italian wise guy having a seizure. It ends with Cage, arms crossed and in full toddler-temper-tantrum mode, declaring "I've never misfiled anything. *Not once!*"

This jaw-dropping display is from *Vampire's Kiss,* a.k.a. the 1989 movie in which the actor ate a live cockroach on camera, and a strong contender for what we'll call "Peak Cage." Maybe your pick would be his declaration that a snakeskin jacket is a symbol of his individuality and belief in personal freedom, all uttered in a single breath, in 1990's *Wild at Heart.* Or you'd go with the opening shot of *Leaving Las Vegas,* the 1995 drama about an alcoholic writer that won Cage his only Oscar to date, where he saunters down a liquor aisle, dancing as he fills a shopping cart with bottle after bottle. Like so much Peak Cage, it's ridiculous and sublime, poetic and nonsensical, giggle-inducing and soul-destroying all at once.

Every Cage fan has a handful of these moments. Not every fan would sucker the iconoclastic star into going to a desert island and force him to act out his best-known roles, however, which is the premise behind *The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent,* the meta comedy that hits theatres on April 21. Featuring Cage as a fictional version of himself – the role he was born to play! – the movie finds the 58-year-old actor accepting $1 million for a billionaire's birthday-party appearance. Except the host is holding the star's family hostage, and the price for their freedom is getting his guest to reenact the greatest hits from the *cinema du* Cage canon.

CAGE'D HEAT Clockwise from left: Cage as the Elvis-worshipping lover boy in *Wild at Heart* (1990); the former prisoner turned hero in the action movie *Con Air* (1997); and the hopeless romantic in *Moonstruck* (1987).

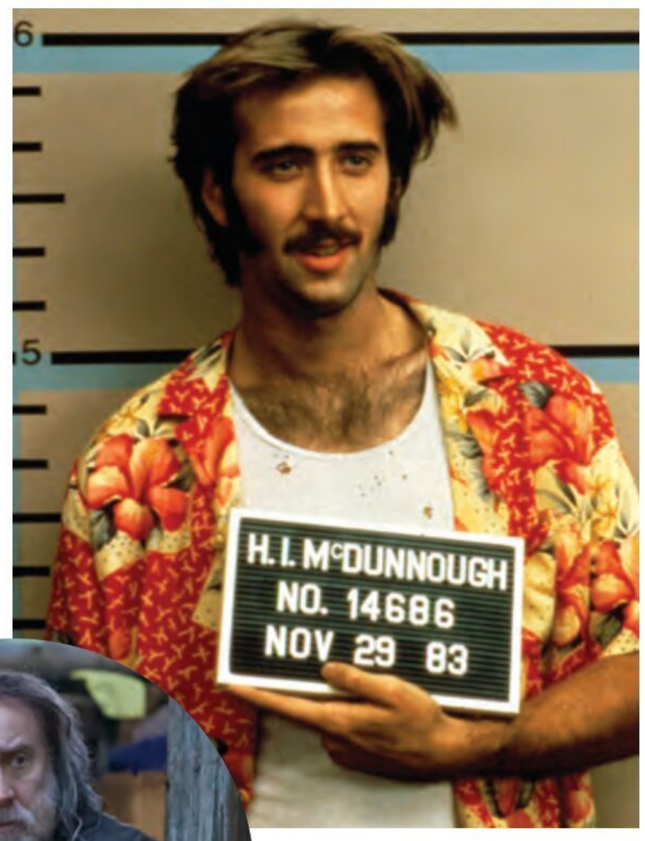
It's a particularly good moment to be a Nicolas Cage fan. His work in last year's *Pig,* an intimate character study about a reclusive chef in search of his prize truffle-sniffing pet, has earned him some of the best reviews of his career. *Age of Cage,* a book by *Rolling Stone* contributor Keith Phipps that dives deep into Cage's work, has just hit shelves. And there's *Unbearable,* which appears to mine a rich legacy of Peak Cage intensity in the name of both laughs and an affectionate tribute. It feels like we can finally reassess what's been a long, strange forty-year trip without forcing the actor into being a full-time genius or a punchline.

Cage has been declared both over the years, but you could see that there was something unusual about him from the moment you saw his young, scruffy punk rocker in *Valley Girl* (1983), a guy hot enough to be a teen-comedy dreamboat but just enough of an oddball to scrape against the typical hunk-with-heart-of-gold conventions. You immediately wanted to see what this guy would do whenever he showed up onscreen.

For the next twelve years, he'd ping-pong between leading-men roles – is there a more

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: ACEY HARPER/GETTY IMAGES; BUENA VISTA PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION; MGM/EVERETT COLLECTION

IN THE NIC(S) OF TIME
Top to bottom: Cage dancing his way to an Oscar in *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995); with Deborah Foreman in *Valley Girl* (1983); as H.I. McDunnough in *Raising Arizona* (1987); and an older, wiser (and calmer) Cage in the indie character study *Pig* (2021).



hopeless romantic than Ronny Cammareri, the one-handed, opera-loving baker who sweeps Cher off her feet in *Moonstruck*? – and lunatics. Watch those movies now and you see how he'd hit the middle point between those opposites, and for every interesting mistake (his voice in *Peggy Sue Got Married,* which Cage claimed was inspired by Gumby's horse, Pokey), you get something like his walking, talking Looney Tune in *Raising Arizona,* or his retro-hipster Romeo in David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*. Who else could pull off the latter's perfect melding of sex appeal, surrealism, and rebel-without-a-clue sincerity? Who else could turn a line like "You filthy piece of white…trash?" into a question and still make it work?

That fertile part of his career peaks with *Leaving Las Vegas,* which adds pathos to his onscreen volatility and momentarily coronates him as Mr. Cage, Serious Actor. Which makes the transition to action hero a bit confusing. *The Rock* (1996) essentially drops a typical Cage eccentric – the nerdy Beatles obsessive Stanley Goodspeed – into a Michael Bay movie as a way of spicing things up. By *Con Air* (1997), he's the pumped-up main attraction. The final entry of his post-Oscar multiplex-spectacle trifecta, *Face/Off* (also 1997), gives him a lot of room to display his chops and colour outside the lines. Maybe this detour is the start of something wonderful?

What happens next is a series of occasional highs and a whole lot of lows. He works with some name directors, like Spike Jonze (*Adaptation*, which deservedly nabs Cage a second Oscar nomination) and Ridley Scott (*Matchstick Men*). An *Indiana Jones*-lite franchise via *National Treasure* keeps him in the spotlight. When he plays a superhero (*Ghost Rider*), Cage mostly exercises what he's called his "Western Kabuki" (read: loud and unhinged) style of acting. Check out the "Not the bees!" meme from his 2006 *Wicker Man* remake and you'll see what we mean. Well-publicised financial woes prompt him to sign up for films that mainly trade off his star power and this-performance-goes-to-eleven outrageousness.

It wasn't like he ever left: You could still hear his voice in animated movies like *The Croods* and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse,* still find a diamond like 2018's revenge movie *Mandy* glittering in the dung heap. But with *Pig,* Cage had a chance to play someone quiet, numb, still wounded from tragedy, and left adrift in a world that prized flashiness over substance. You witness something besides self-parody. He reminds you he could press pause on the sound and fury.

Coming off the heels of that triumph, the time now feels right to give the public something like *Unbearable Weight* – what could have been a mournful trip down memory lane for fans now comes off like a victory lap. Having proven he can still bring his A-game, we can watch him send up his C-list status. And maybe, just maybe, we can witness an older and wiser Cage scream the alphabet one more time – not in the name of reliving his glory days, but reclaiming something old in the name of starting some bold new chapter. ®

FROM TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: MGM/EVERETT COLLECTION; ATLANTIC RELEASING/EVERETT COLLECTION; 20TH CENTURY FOX FILM CORP./EVERETT COLLECTION; DAVID REAMER/EVERETT COLLECTION

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[*Cont. from 65*] Silverman. "If you had told me they were playing a guy's backyard over here, I'd be like, 'No way – they're in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame,' " McLynn says. " 'What do they need to play a private gig for?' But they're all doing it."

WHEN LIVE MUSIC went into lockdown in March 2020, so did the private-gig world. But it didn't completely shut down: During the height of the pandemic, artists including Sting, Leon Bridges, Keith Urban, Christina Aguilera, and Ryan Tedder of OneRepublic were hired for virtual private concerts, for fees starting at just under $100,000 and rising into the mid six figures.

But last year, as concerts began returning to some degree of normalcy, the way-under-the-radar bookings began to increase. This year, CAA alone has more than seven-hundred events (both private and corporate) planned, each featuring one of its music acts. (Norman declines to specify which, but the company's roster includes Lionel Richie, Bon Jovi, the Doobie Brothers, and Earth, Wind, and Fire.) According to two leading talent agencies, corporate-party gigs once accounted for the bulk of such exclusive shows, about seventy-five per cent, but private ones are inching up from twenty-five to forty per cent of that combined income. "There are so many great opportunities out there, and more to come," says manager Michael Lippman, one of whose acts, Matchbox Twenty, has hit the private-party circuit. "It's much bigger now than it was then." Sometimes, the party hosts initiate the discussions, reaching out to talent agencies – and finding the right match of music, audience, and remuneration.

Even as Omicron was starting to hit last fall, the music and the festivities didn't completely stop. In December, Lenny Kravitz and the controversial rapper T.I. were hired for undisclosed fees to play at a waterfront property in Miami owned by flush art collector and coal-family scion Wayne Boich. The occasion was Richard Mille After Dark, celebrating the high-end Swiss watchmaker. To a crowd that included Venus and Serena Williams, Leonardo DiCaprio, and *Wolf of Wall Street* inspiration Jordan Belfort, Kravitz emerged to play a set, followed at midnight by T.I. – as a yacht pulled up alongside to watch them.

Thanks to confidentiality agreements, the fees collected by the artists can be hard to pin down: They can range from five-figure deals to what one booker calls "six- or seven-figure situations" for pop icons. "I am constantly coaching my clients through their sticker shock," says Siegan, citing a seven-figure price tag from Bruno Mars; another source says Mars can command as much as $4 million.

"Probably bands that were a little hesitant to do them are more willing to now," says McGrath. "[The hosts] usually have their own Covid protocol, and there are less people involved. You're not carrying your crew, you're not carrying buses, so it's high reward, less risk. And so what's not to love about that? A lot of them are destination events in Cabo, the Bahamas, Hawaii. It's like, 'Yeah, twist my arm.' "

For some musicians, the appeal isn't always financial. "The private events will try to cater to the artist more than the average promoter," says Kevin Monty of Red Light Management, which manages Phish, the Dave Matthews Band, Valerie June, and many others. "Give them nicer wine or access to lodging that might be exclusive, and the catering is better than a club gig." Artists can make their own demands – like, in rare instances, no dancing during their sets. "It's a great way to network and exchange ideas with people who may be like-minded, but not in the same professional arena as you," says one artist who's played a private show.

Whether they want to entertain the thought or not, pop acts are newly reconsidering super-private shows thanks to Covid: They may want to compensate for lost touring revenue, help support their crew, keep up their chops, augment their low streaming income, or all of the above. "There are probably some artists out there who will try to make up for lost time and be a bit more active than they might have otherwise been," says Red Light's Monty. "People have a sense of obligation to their band and crew to give them the opportunity to work. That was largely taken away, but now is the chance." Adds Siegan, "It's such a significant revenue stream for bands who are in demand. I'm frankly amazed by artists who shy away from this, particularly in this new music economy, where there's less revenue from record sales."

"There was the undertone of 'You're dancing with the devil,' or you're a corporate whore. But we came home with a load of money."

–JESUS JONES' MIKE EDWARDS

But with the uptick in such gigs and the outsize paychecks has come a new code of silence. Increasingly, musicians and party planners have to sign nondisclosure agreements. Through their representatives, many of these artists declined to discuss the events or fees with *Rolling Stone* or did not respond to requests to do so; the same with some of the higher-profile hosts. In some cases, guests have had to hand over their cellphones to avoid photos leaking on social media. "It's super-confidential," says agent Greg Janese of UTA, which also books many of its clients for private events, like Pitbull, Flo Rida, and other contemporary acts. "We get a lot of offers for upper-high-end private parties, where you get to sign a nondisclosure. People just don't want it out that they're booking these kinds of parties."

In the UK, the catering company Global Infusion Group (and its offshoot Eat to the Beat) has provided food for many such events. Among the most recent was a wedding at a castle with a major pop act – and that's all CEO Bonnie May can say about it. "For some certain clients that love the confidentiality, it's a great attraction in terms of working for us, and we are really, really strict," May says. "There is just a no-go area in terms of sharing that on social media."

Given the way that those in the field predict business will go in the next few years, it's unlikely that such a veil of secrecy will be lifted anytime soon. "When things started to return to 'normal,' whatever the hell that is, it still wasn't considered prudent to be throwing lavish parties," Siegan says. "That said, there is an air of excitement with many of our clients around throwing parties, impressing their friends and colleagues, and just going over the top again. It feels like an impending Roaring Twenties."

IN 2005, David H. Brooks, whose company built bulletproof vests for the military, hired Stevie Nicks, Steven Tyler and Joe Perry, Tom Petty, the Eagles, 50 Cent, Nelly, and others for a bat mitzvah for his teenage daughter, paying some of them in the low millions. Two years later, he was arrested for (among other allegations) insider trading and using company money to pay for his lavish lifestyle; he was serving seventeen years in prison before his death in 2016. "This guy ended up being a crook, and it was a nightmare," says Janese, who was working at the time with Tyler and Nicks. "It was just a bummer that that happened."

Organizing private-bash events can be a headache on any number of levels, which sometimes includes transforming someone's house into a concert space. "You need an experienced production manager," says manager Jonathan Wolfson, whose clients, such as Hall and Oates, have played private parties (including one at a Long Island estate, where Hall and Oates were joined onstage by Jamie Foxx). "There are safety issues. Sometimes stages have to be built, and not everyone's backyard is set up for an event." In 2016, Sia was offered $1 million for a backyard event in St. Barts, for which the host was prepared to build a dance floor and canopy with a clear roof. But in the end, Sia pulled out when her camp realized that the small outdoor space couldn't accommodate her full, normal production and dancers.

Vetting the people putting up the money is even more complicated. Given that the $10 million Brooks used for his daughter's party was cited by the Justice Department as one of his financial misuses, the incident reveals the potential red flags involved in such paydays. In 2013, Lopez sang "Happy Birthday" to the president of Turkmenistan, the Central Asia nation just north of Iran. There, according to the Human Rights Watch report that year, "human rights defenders and other activists face the constant threat of government reprisal. The government continues to use imprisonment as a tool for political retaliation." (The report also cited President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow's "cult of personality.") After receiving backlash for the show, which was held at a lavish resort in the country, Lopez's camp issued a statement that "had there been knowledge of human rights issues of any kind, Jennifer would not have attended."

According to a source, Billie Eilish was offered seven figures for a Middle Eastern gig and passed. Train turned down a big-payday show in that part of the world as well. "It was a guy who made money in the diamond business," says McLynn, "and we didn't feel comfortable doing it."

"Some artists are more selective and want to know all about who they're performing for, more so for the private events," says Adam Grayson of the talent booking agency GrayRock Entertainment, which helps arrange for musical acts to play for clients. "They're not going to just blindly go into something, and often they do want to know the politics. Some don't care, some do."

In the meantime, the circuit isn't going anywhere, and neither are the paychecks. Matchbox Twenty and Sugar Ray this year are each booked for weddings in the Bahamas and Canada, respectively. McGrath does specify that playing a wedding doesn't mean he'll be introducing the couple or playing a first-dance song. "They'll have a big hall or a club, and we'll play," he says. "It's not Adam Sandler in *The Wedding Singer*. But I'm not saying that's not going to be my future." ℗

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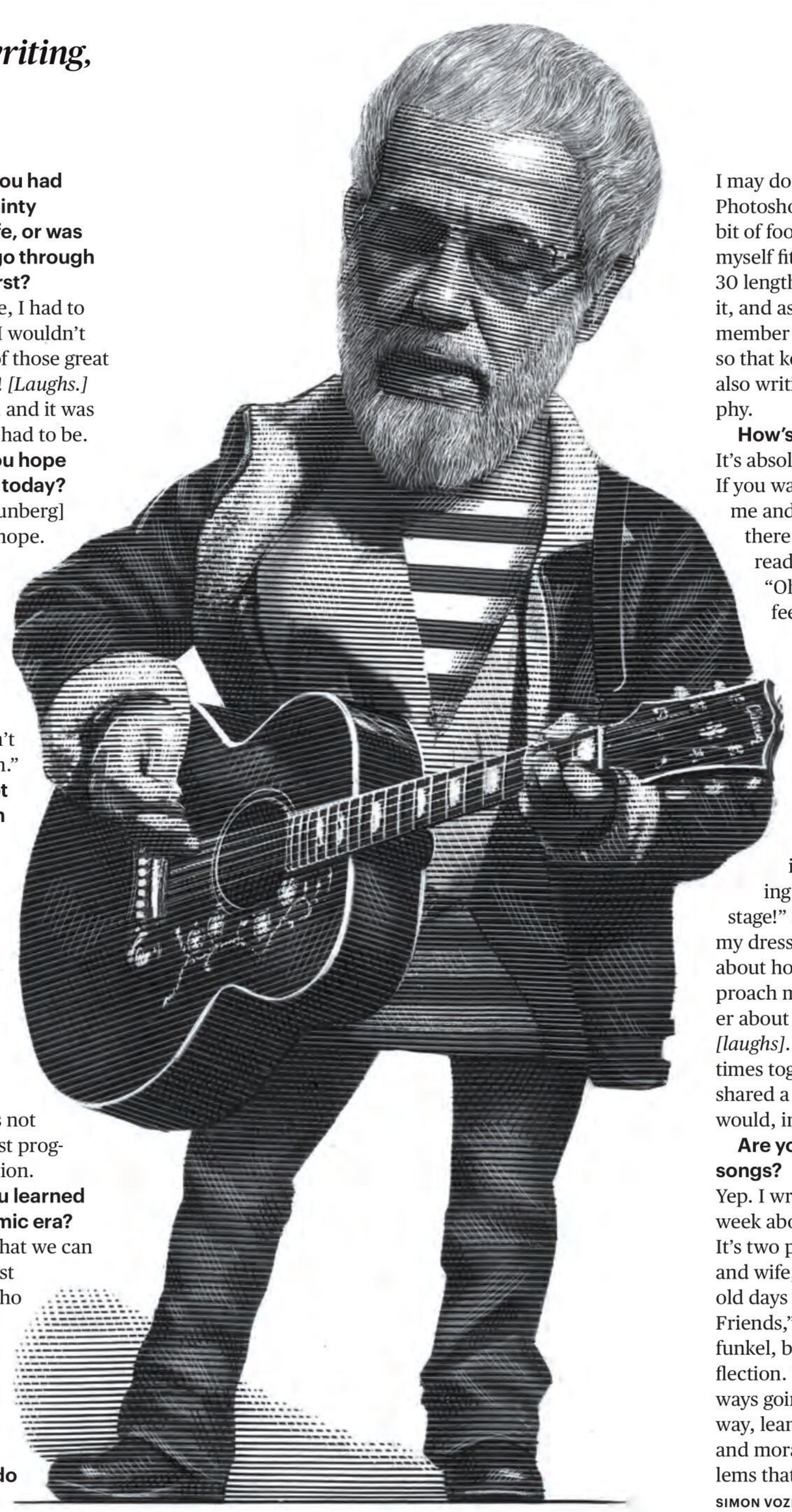
The folk-rock seeker on songwriting, spirituality, and climate hope



What's the best advice anyone has ever given you?
I would have to go to the prophetic sources: "Leave that which makes you doubt for that which does not make you doubt." That means you have a calmness about you, and you can relax a little bit.

When you put it that way, it sounds almost easy.

> ***Yusuf recently reissued his 1971 album, Teaser and the Firecat.***

You're right. It's not necessarily that easy. Sometimes you have to fight yourself, because your soul or your desire are pulling you one way.

You were writing about profound subjects at an early age. What led to a song like "The Wind"?
I'm talking to somebody; I think it's the divine, but I'm not quite sure, and because I'm not sure, it's universal. My goal was to be able to detach myself from my physical surroundings and material things. I was very earnestly searching. I would visit esoteric bookshops whenever I could, and pick up whatever new pathway to the truth I could find.

Many musicians have written songs about searching for God. You really followed through on that in your life.
I mean, Little Richard left music. He said it was the devil's stuff. Then he came back again. But, yeah – I did strive, not only lyrically, but mentally, spiritually, to attain the ideals of my songs.

Do you wish you had found that certainty earlier in your life, or was it necessary to go through the searching first?
Oh, yeah, for sure, I had to go through that. I wouldn't have written all of those great songs – come on! *[Laughs.]* It was important, and it was necessary, and it had to be.

What gives you hope about the world today?
I think Greta [Thunberg] is a great sign of hope. I love to see her talking, almost knocking these politicians down with her words. People are picking up on things and saying "I don't want this to go on."

You faced a lot of hostility when you first told people about your faith. Do you think the world has gotten any better at understanding Islam since then?
Well, we've got a Muslim mayor in London, so that's not bad. That's at least progress in one direction.

What have you learned from the pandemic era?
It's taught us all that we can change. I feel most sorry for those who were kept in their urban prisons – a one-bedroom flat somewhere. That's scary.

What do you do to relax?
I may do some art, get into Photoshop. I might watch a bit of football. I swim to keep myself fit. I don't enjoy doing 30 lengths a day, but I do it, and as I do so, I try to remember the names of God, so that keeps me afloat. I'm also writing my autobiography.

How's that going?
It's absolutely my whole life. If you want to know about me and Jimi Hendrix, it's in there. Some friends have read it, and they went, "Oh, my God. I don't feel as if I've lived!"

What do you remember about Jimi?
We were doing a tour [in the spring of 1967]. It was the first time he lit his guitar on fire. They were screaming at me, saying "There's a fire onstage!" I was too scared in my dressing room, thinking about how I'm going to approach my set, to even bother about going down there *[laughs]*. We had some good times together, as well. We shared a few puffs, as you would, in that purple haze.

Are you still writing new songs?
Yep. I wrote a new song last week about the climate. It's two people, a husband and wife, talking about the old days – a little like "Old Friends," by Simon and Garfunkel, but as a climate reflection. The songs are always going to be, in some way, leaning toward idealism and morality – and the problems that get in the way.

SIMON VOZICK-LEVINSON

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